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MOORCOCK**

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The first Elric story, "The Dreaming City," appeared in No. 47 and mainly set the stage for the colourful backcloth Michael Moorcock is beginning to weave in this series

WHILE THE GODS LAUGH

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

o n e

One night, as Elric sat moodily drinking alone in a tavern, a wingless woman of Myyrrhn came gliding out of the storm and rested her lithe body against him.

Her face was thin and frail-boned, almost as white as Elric's own albino skin, and she wore flimsy pale-green robes which contrasted well with her dark red hair.

The tavern was ablaze with candle-flame and alive with droning argument and gusty laughter, but the words of the woman of Myyrrhn came clear and liquid, carrying over the zesty din.

"I have sought you twenty days," she said to Elric who regarded her insolently through hooded crimson eyes and lazed in a high-backed chair; a silver wine-cup in his long-fingered right hand and his left on the pommel of his sorcerous runesword *Stormbringer*.

"Twenty days," murmured the Melniboléan softly, speaking as if to himself; deliberately rude. "A long time for a beautiful and lonely woman to be wandering the world." He opened his eyes a trifle wider and spoke to her directly: "I am Elric of Melniboné, as you evidently know. I grant no favours and ask none. Bearing this in mind, tell me why you have sought me for twenty days."

Equably, the woman replied, undaunted by the albino's supercilious tone. "You are a bitter man, Elric; I know this also—and you are grief-haunted for reasons which are already legend. I ask you no favours—but bring you myself and a proposition. What do you desire most in the world?"

"Peace," Elric told her simply. Then he smiled ironically and said: "I am an evil man, lady, and my destiny is hell-doomed, but I am not unwise, nor unfair. Let me remind you a little of the truth. Call this legend if you prefer—I do not care.

"A woman died a year ago, on the blade of my trusty sword." He patted the blade sharply and his eyes were suddenly hard and self-mocking. "Since then I have courted no woman and desired none. Why should I break such secure habits? If asked, I grant you that I could speak poetry to you, and that you have a grace and beauty which moves me to interesting speculation, but I would not load any part of my dark burden upon one as exquisite as you. Any relationship between us, other than formal, would necessitate my unwilling shifting of part of that burden." He paused for an instant and then said slowly: "I should admit that I scream in my sleep sometimes and am often tortured by incommunicable self-loathing. Go while you can, lady, and forget Elric for he can bring only grief to your soul."

With a quick movement he turned his gaze from her and lifted the silver wine-cup, draining it and replenishing it from a jug at his side.

"No," said the wingless woman of Myyrrhn calmly, "I will not. Come with me."

She rose and gently took Elric's hand. Without knowing why, Elric allowed himself to be led from the tavern and out into the wild, rainless storm which howled around the Filkharian city of Raschil. A protective and cynical smile hovered about his mouth as she drew him towards the sea-lashed quayside where she told him her name. Shaarilla of the Dancing Mist, wingless daughter of a dead necromancer—a cripple in her own strange land, and an outcast.

Elric felt uncomfortably drawn to this calm-eyed woman who wasted few words. He felt a great surge of emotion well within him; emotion he had never thought to experience again, and he wanted to take her finely moulded shoulders and press her slim body to his. But he quelled the urge and studied her marble delicacy and her wild hair which flowed in the wind about her head.

Silence rested comfortably between them while the chaotic wind howled mournfully over the sea. Here, Elric could ignore the warm stink of the city and he felt almost relaxed. At last, looking away from him towards the swirling sea, her green robe curling in the wind, she said: "You have heard, of course, of the Dead Gods' Book?"

Elric nodded. He was interested, despite the need he felt to disassociate himself as much as possible from his fellows. The mythical book was believed to contain knowledge which could solve many problems that had plagued men for centuries—it held a holy and mighty wisdom which every sorcerer desired to sample. But it was believed destroyed, hurled into the sun when the Old Gods were dying in the cosmic wastes which lay beyond the outer reaches of the solar system. Another legend, apparently of later origin, spoke vaguely of the dark ones who had interrupted the Book's sunward coursing and had stolen it before it could be destroyed. Most scholars discounted this legend, arguing that, by this time, the book would have come to light if it did still exist.

Elric made himself speak flatly so that he appeared to be disinterested when he answered Shaarilla. "Why do you mention the Book?"

"I know that it exists," Shaarilla replied intensely, "And I know where it is. My father acquired the knowledge just before he died. Myself—and the book—you may have if you will help me get it."

Could the secret of peace be contained in the book? Elric wondered. Would he, if he found it, be able to dispense with *Stormbringer* his hated runesword.

"If you want it so badly that you seek my help," he said eventually, "why do you not wish to keep it?"

"Because I would be afraid to have such a thing perpetually in my custody—it is not a book for a woman to own, but you are possibly the last mighty nigromancer left in the world and it is fitting that you should have it. Besides, you might kill me to obtain it—I would never be safe with such a volume in my hands. I need only one small part of its wisdom."

"What is that?" Elric enquired, studying her patrician beauty with a new pulse stirring within him.

Her mouth set and the lids fell over her eyes. "When we have the book in our hands — then you will have your answer. Not before."

"This answer is good enough," Elrick remarked quickly, seeing that he would gain no more information at that stage. "And the answer appeals to me." Then, half before he realised it, he seized her shoulders in his slim, pale hands and pressed his colourless lips to her scarlet mouth.

Elric and Shaarilla rode Westward, towards the Silent Land, across the lush plains of Shazaar where their ship had berthed two days earlier. The border country between Shazaar and the Silent Land was a lonely stretch of territory, unoccupied even by peasant dwellings; a no-man's land, though fertile and rich in natural wealth. The inhabitants of Shazaar had deliberately refrained from extending their borders further, for though the dwellers in the Silent Land rarely ventured beyond the Marshes of the Mist, the natural borderline between the two lands, the inhabitants of Shazaar held their unknown neighbours in almost superstitious fear.

The journey had been clean and swift, though ominous, with several persons who should have known nothing of their purpose warning the travellers of nearing danger. Elric brooded, recognising the signs of doom but choosing to ignore them and communicate nothing to Shaarilla who, for her part, seemed content with Elric's silence. They spoke little in the day and so saved their breath for the wild love-play of the night.

The thud of the two horses' hooves on the soft turf, the muted creak and clatter of Elric's harness and sword, were the only sounds to break the stillness of the clear winter day as the pair rode steadily, nearing the quaking, treacherous trails of the Marshes of the Mist.

One gloomy night, they reached the borders of the Silent Land, marked by the marshland, and they halted and made camp, pitching their silk tent on a hill overlooking the mist-shrouded wastes.

Banked like black pillows against the horizon, the clouds were ominous. The moon lurked behind them, sometimes piercing them sufficiently to send a pale tentative beam down on to the glistening marsh or its ragged, grassy frontiers. Once, a moonbeam glanced off silver, illuminating the dark silhouette of Elric, but, as if repelled by the sight of a living creature on that bleak hill, the moon once again slunk behind its cloud-shield, leaving Elric thinking deeply. Leaving Elric in the darkness he desired.

Thunder rumbled, far out over distant mountains, sounding like the laughter of far-off Gods. Elric shivered, pulled his blue cloak more tightly about him, and continued to stare over the misted lowlands.

Shaarilla came to him soon, and she stood beside him, swathed in a thick woollen cloak which could not keep out all the damp chill in the air.

"The Silent Land," she murmured. "Are all the stories true, Elric? Did they teach you of it in old Melniboné?"

Elric frowned, annoyed that she had disturbed his thoughts. He turned abruptly to look at her, staring blankly through his crimson-irised eyes for a moment and then saying flatly:

"The inhabitants are unhuman and feared. This I know. Few men ventured into their territory, ever. None have returned, to my knowledge. Even in the days when Melniboné was a powerful Empire, this was one nation my ancestors never ruled—nor did they desire to do so. The denizens of the Silent Land are said to be a dying race, far more evil than my ancestors ever were, who enjoyed dominion over the Earth long before men gained any sort of power. They rarely venture beyond the confines of their territory, nowadays, encompassed as it is by marshland and mountains."

Shaarilla laughed, then, with little humour. "So they are unhuman are they, Elric? Then what of my people, who are related to them? What of me, Elric?"

"You're human enough for me," replied Elric insouciantly, looking her in the eyes. She smiled.

"No compliment," she said, "but I'll take it for one—until your glib tongue finds a better."

That night they slept restlessly and, as he had predicted, Elric screamed agonisingly in his turbulent, terror-filled sleep and he called a name which made Shaarilla's eyes fill with pain and jealousy. That name was Cymoril. Wide-eyed in his grim sleep, Elric seemed to be staring at the one he named, speaking other words in a sibillant language which made Shaarilla block her ears and shudder.

The next morning, as they broke camp, folding the rustling fabric of the yellow silk tent between them, Shaarilla avoided looking at Elric directly but later, since he made no move to speak, she asked him a question in a voice which shook somewhat.

It was a question which she needed to ask, but one which came hard to her lips. "Why do you desire the Dead Gods' Book, Elric? What do you believe you will find in it?"

Elric shrugged, dismissing the question, but she repeated her words less slowly, with more insistence.

"Very well then," he said eventually. "But it is not easy to answer you in a few words. I desire, if you like, to know one or two things."

"And what is that, Elric?"

The tall albino dropped the folded tent to the grass and sighed. His fingers played nervously with the pommel of his runesword. "Does an ultimate God exist—or not? That is what I need to know, Shaarilla, if my life is to have any direction at all."

"Does Law or Chaos govern our lives? Men need a God, so the philosophers tell us. Have they made one—or did one make them? We know that the Old Gods, as we call them, once lived and are now dead. But were they superior beings to us, or simply like men only wiser? They were not, as far as we know, *ultimate* beings, for they are dead."

Shaarilla put a hand on Elric's arm. "Why must you know?" she said.

"Despairingly, sometimes, I seek the comfort of a God, Shaarilla. My mind goes out, lying awake at night, searching

through the black barrenness of space for something—anything—which will take me to it, warm me, protect me, tell me that there is order in the chaotic tumble of the universe; that it is consistent, this precision of the planets, not simply a brief, bright spark of sanity in an eternity of malevolent anarchy."

Elric sighed and his quiet tones were tinged with hopelessness. "Without a God, a sensitivity to the order of things—of climbing destiny — without this, my only comfort is to attempt, equably, to accept the anarchy. This way, I can revel in chaos and know, without fear, that we are all doomed from the start — that our creeping flash through time is meaningless and damned. I can accept, then, that we are more than forsaken, because there was never anything there to forsake us. Sometimes this is comforting to know—sometimes it is mind-shattering and I gape at myself in horror, wondering why I should believe in anarchy and evil when so much proof exists to the contrary. I have weighed the proof, Shaarilla, and believe that anarchy prevails, in spite of all the laws which seemingly govern our actions, our sorcery, our logic. I see only chaos in the world. If the Book we seek tells me otherwise, then I shall gladly believe it. Until then, I will put my trust only in my sword and myself."

Shaarilla stared at Elric strangely. "Not all your words inspire me with feeling," she said, "but I believe I know what you mean. Could not this philosophy of yours have been influenced by recent events in your past, however? Do you perhaps, fear the consequences of your murder and treachery? Is it not more comforting for you to believe in anarchy and deserts which are rarely just?"

Elric turned on her, crimson eyes blazing in anger, but even as he made to speak, the anger fled him and he dropped his eyes towards the ground, hooding them from her gaze.

"Perhaps," he said lamely. "I do not know. That is the only *real* truth, Shaarilla. *I do not know.*"

Shaarilla nodded understandingly, her eyes lit by an enigmatic sympathy; but Elric did not see the look she gave him, for his own eyes were full of crystal tears which flowed down his lean, white face and took his strength and will momentarily from him.

"I am a man possessed," he groaned, "and without this devil-blade I carry—I would not be a man at all."

t w o

They mounted their swift, black horses and spurred them with abandoned savagery down the hillside towards the Marsh, their cloaks whipping behind them as the wind caught them, lashing them high into the air. Both rode with set, hard faces, refusing to acknowledge the aching uncertainty which lurked within them.

And the horses' hooves had splashed into quaking bogland before they could halt.

Cursing, Elric tugged hard on his reins, pulling his horse back on to firm ground. Shaarilla, too, fought her own panicky stallion and guided the beast to the safety of the turf.

"How do we cross?" Elric asked her impatiently.

"There was a map—" Shaarilla began hesitantly.

"Where is it?"

"It—it was lost. I lost it. But I tried hard to memorise it. I think I'll be able to get us safely across."

"How did you lose it—and why didn't you tell me of this before?" Elric stormed.

"I'm sorry, Elric—but for a whole day, just before I found you in that tavern, my memory was gone. Somehow, I lived through a day without knowing it—and when I awoke, the map was missing."

Elric frowned. "There is some force working against us, I am sure," he muttered, "but what it is, I do not know." He raised his voice and said to her: "Let us hope that your memory is not too faulty, now. These Marshes are infamous the world over but, by all accounts, only natural hazards wait for us." He grimaced and put his fingers around the hilt of his runesword. "Best go first, Shaarilla, but stay close. Lead the way."

She nodded, dumbly, and turned her horse's head towards the North, galloping along the bank until she came to a place where a great, tapering rock loomed. Here, a grassy path, four feet or so across, led out into the misty marsh. They could only see a little distance ahead, because of the clinging mist, but it seemed that the trail remained firm for some way. Shaarilla walked her horse on to the path and jolted forward at a slow trot, Elric following immediately behind her.

Through the swirling, heavy mist which shone whitely, the horses moved hesitantly and their riders had to keep them on short, tight rein. The mist padded the marsh with silence

and the gleaming, watery fens around them stank with foul putrescence. No animal scurried, no bird shrieked above them. Everywhere was a haunting, fear-laden silence which made both horses and riders uneasy.

With panic in their throats, Elric and Shaarilla rode on, deeper and deeper into the unnatural Marshes of the Mist, their eyes wary and even their nostrils quivering for scent of danger in the stinking morass.

Hours later, when the sun was long past its zenith, Shaarilla's horse reared, screaming and whinnying. She shouted for Elric, her exquisite features twisted in fear as she stared into the mist. He spurred his own bucking horse forwards and joined her.

Something moved, slowly, menacingly in the clinging whiteness. Elric's right hand whipped over to his left side and grasped the hilt of *Stormbringer*.

The blade shrieked out of its scabbard, a black fire gleaming along its length and alien power flowing from it into Elric's arm and through his body. A weird, unholy light leapt into Elric's crimson eyes and his mouth was wrenched into a hideous grin as he forced the frightened horse further into the skulking mist.

"Arioch, Lord of the Seven Darknesses, be with me now!" Elric yelled as he made out the shifting shape ahead of him. It was white, like the mist, yet somehow *darker*. It stretched high above Elric's head. It was nearly eight feet tall and almost as broad. But it was still only an outline, seeming to have no face or limbs—only movement: darting, malevolent movement!

Elric could feel his horse's great heart beating between his legs as the beast plunged forward under its rider's iron control. Shaarilla was screaming something behind him, but he could not hear the words. Elric hacked at the white shape, but his sword met only mist and it howled angrily. The fear-crazed horse would go no further and Elric was forced to dismount.

"Keep hold of the steed," he shouted behind him to Shaarilla and moved on light feet towards the darting shape which hovered ahead of him, blocking his path.

Now he could make out some of its salencies. Two eyes, the colour of thin, yellow wine, were set high in the thing's body, though it had no separate head. A mouthing, obscene

slit, filled with fangs, lay just beneath the eyes. It had no nose or ears that Elric could see. Four appendages sprang from its upper parts and its lower body slithered along the ground, unsupported by any limbs. Elric's eyes ached as he looked at it. It was incredibly disgusting to behold and its amorphous body gave off a stench of death and decay. Fighting down his fear, the albino inched forward warily, his sword held high to parry any thrust the thing might make with its arms. Elric recognised it from a description in one of his grimoires. It was a Mist Giant—possibly the only Mist Giant, Bellbane. Even the wisest wizards were uncertain how many existed—one or many. It was a ghoul of the swamplands which fed off the souls and the blood of men and beasts. But the Marshes of this Mist were far to the east of Bellbane's reputed haunts.

Elric ceased to wonder why so few animals inhabited that stretch of the swamp. Overhead the sky was beginning to darken.

Stormbringer throbbed in Elric's grasp as he called the names of the ancient, evil Demon-Gods of his people. The nauseous ghoul obviously recognised the names. For an instant, it wavered backwards. Elric made his legs move towards the thing. Now he saw that the ghoul was not white at all. But it had no colour to it that Elric could recognise. There was a suggestion of orangeness dashed with sickening greenish yellow, but he did not see the colours with his eyes—he only *sensed* the alien, unholy tinctures.

Then Elric rushed towards the thing, shouting the names which now had no meaning to his surface consciousness. "*Balaan—Marthim! Aesma! Alastor! Saebos! Verdelet! Nizilfkm! Haborym! Haborym of the Fires Which Destroy!*" His whole mind was torn in two. Part of him wanted to run, to hide, but he had no control over the power which now gripped him and pushed him to meet the horror. His sword blade hacked and slashed at the shape. It was like trying to cut through water—sentient, pulsating water. But *Stormbringer* had effect. The whole shape of the ghoul quivered as if in dreadful pain. Elric felt himself plucked into the air and his vision went. He could see nothing—do nothing but hack and cut at the thing which now held him.

Sweat poured from him as, blindly, he fought on.

Pain which was hardly physical—a deeper, horrifying pain, filled his being as he howled now in agony and struck

continually at the yielding bulk which embraced him and was pulling him slowly towards its gaping maw. He struggled and writhed in the obscene grasp of the thing. With powerful arms, it was holding him, almost lasciviously, drawing him closer as a rough lover would draw a girl. Even the mighty power intrinsic in the runesword did not seem enough to kill the monster. Though its efforts were somewhat weaker than earlier, it still drew Elric nearer to the gnashing, slaverling mouth-slit.

Elric cried out the names of his Gods again, while *Storm-bringer* danced and sang an evil song in his right hand. In agony, Elric writhed, praying, begging and promising, but still he was drawn inch by inch towards the grinning maw.

Savagely, grimly, he fought and a dreadful name formed deep in his throat and forced itself through protesting vocal chords until it seethed piercingly from the albino's contracted mouth. It was the ultimate name—incredibly evil in its soul-shaking implications. Almost imperceptibly, the Mist Giant weakened. Feeling that he was, at last, beginning to make a definite impression on the Giant's dreadful dynamism though his mind and limbs were shuddering, Elric pressed his advantage and the knowledge that the ghoul was losing its strength gave him more power. Blindly, the agony piercing every nerve of his body, he struck and struck.

Then, quite suddenly, he was falling.

He seemed to fall for hours, slowly, weightlessly until he landed upon a surface which yielded beneath him. He began to sink.

Far off, beyond time and space, he heard a distant voice calling to him. He did not want to hear it; he was content to lie where he was as the cold, comforting stuff in which he lay dragged him slowly into itself.

Then some sixth sense made him realise that it was Shaarilla's voice calling him and he forced himself to make sense out of her words.

"Elric—the marsh! You're in the marsh. Don't move!"

He smiled to himself. Why should he move? Down he was sinking, slowly, calmly—down into the welcoming marsh . . .

With a mental jolt, full awareness of the situation came back to him and he jerked his eyes open. Above him was mist. To one side a pool of unnameable colouring was slowly evaporating, giving off a foul odour. On the other side he could just make out a human form, gesticulating wildly.

Beyond the human form were the barely discernible shapes of two horses. Shaarilla was there. Beneath him—

Beneath him was the marsh.

Thick, stinking slime was sucking him downwards as he lay spread-eagled upon it, half-submerged already. *Stormbringer* was still in his right hand. He could just see it if he turned his head. Carefully, he tried to lift the top half of his body from the sucking morass. He succeeded, only to feel his legs sink deeper. Sitting upright, he shouted to the girl.

"Shaarilla! Quickly—a rope!"

"There is no rope, Elric!" She was ripping off her top garment, frantically tearing it into strips.

Still Elric sank, his feet finding no purchase beneath them.

Shaarilla hastily knotted the strips of cloth. She flung the makeshift rope inexpertly towards the sinking albino. It fell short. Fumbling in her haste, she threw it again. This time his groping left hand found it. The girl began to haul on the fabric. Elric felt himself rise a little and then stop.

"It's no good, Elric—I haven't the strength."

Cursing her, Elric shouted: "The horse—tie your end to the horse!"

She ran towards one of the horses and looped the cloth around the pommel of the saddle. Then she tugged at the beast's reins and began to walk it away.

Swiftly, Elric was dragged from the sucking bog and, still gripping *Stormbringer* was pulled to the inadequate safety of the strip of turf.

Gasping, he tried to stand, but found his legs incredibly weak beneath him. He rose, staggered, and fell. Shaarilla kneeled down beside him.

"Are you hurt?"

Elric smiled in spite of his weakness. "I don't think so."

"It was dreadful, I couldn't see properly what was happening. You seemed to disappear and then—then you screamed that—that word." She was trembling, her face pale and taut.

"What word?" Elric was genuinely puzzled. "What word did I scream?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter—but whatever it was—it saved you. You reappeared soon afterwards and fell into the marsh . . ."

Stormbringer's power was still flowing into the albino. He already felt stronger.

With an effort, he got up and stumbled unsteadily towards his horse.

"I'm sure that the Mist Giant does not usually haunt this marsh—it was sent here. By what—or whom—I don't know, but we must get to firmer ground while we can."

Shaarilla said: "Which way—back or forward?"

Elric frowned. "Why, forward, of course. Why do you ask?"

She swallowed and shook her head. "Let's hurry, then," she said.

They mounted their horses and rode with little caution until the marsh and its cloak of mist was behind them.

Now the journey took on a new urgency as Elric realised that some force was attempting to put obstacles in their way. They rested little and savagely rode their powerful horses to a virtual standstill.

On the fifth day they were riding through barren, rocky country and a light rain was falling.

The hard ground was slippery so that they were forced to ride more slowly, huddled over the sodden necks of their horses, muffled in cloaks which only inadequately kept out the drizzling rain. They had ridden in silence for some time before they heard a ghastly cackling baying ahead of them and the rattle of hooves.

Elric motioned towards a large rock looming to their right. "Shelter there," he said. "Something comes towards us—possibly more enemies. With luck, they'll pass us." Shaarilla mutely obeyed him and together they waited as the hideous baying grew nearer.

"One rider—several other beasts." Elric said, listening intently. "The beasts either follow or pursue the rider."

Then they were in sight—racing through the rain. A man frantically spurring an equally frightened horse—and behind him, the distance decreasing, a pack of what at first appeared to be dogs. But these were not dogs—they were half-dog and half-bird, with the lean, shaggy bodies and legs of dogs but possessing birdlike talons in place of paws and savagely curved beaks which snapped where muzzles should have been.

"The hunting dogs of the Dharzi!" gasped Shaarilla. "I thought that they, like their masters, were long extinct!"

"I, also," Elric said. "What are they doing in these parts? There was never contact between the Dharzi and the dwellers of this Land?"

"Brought here—by *something*," Shaarilla whispered. "Those devil-dogs will scent us to be sure."

Elric reached for his runesword. "Then we can lose nothing by aiding their quarry," he said, urging his mount forward. "Wait here, Shaarilla."

By this time, the devil-pack and the man they pursued were rushing past the sheltering rock, speeding down a narrow defile. Elric spurred his horse down the slope.

"Ho there!" he shouted to the frantic rider. "Turn and stand, my friend—I'm here to aid you!"

His moaning runesword lifted high, Elric thundered towards the snapping, howling devil-dogs and his horse's hooves struck one with an impact which broke the unnatural beast's spine. There were some five or six of the weird dogs left. The rider turned his horse and drew a long sabre from a scabbard at his waist. He was a small man, with a broad ugly mouth. He grinned in relief.

"A lucky chance, this meeting, good master!"

This was all he had time to remark before two of the dogs were leaping at him and he was forced to give his whole attention to defending himself from their slashing talons and snapping beaks.

The other three dogs concentrated their vicious attention upon Elric. One leapt high, its beak aimed at Elric's throat. He felt foul breath on his face and hastily brought *Storm-bringer* round in an arc which chopped the dog in two. Filthy blood splattered Elric and his horse and the scent of it seemed to increase the fury of the other dogs' attack. But the blood made the dancing black runesword sing an almost ecstatic tune and Elric felt it writhe in his grasp and stab at another of the hideous dogs. The point caught the beast just below its breastbone as it reared up at the albino. It screamed in terrible agony and turned its beak to seize the blade. As the beak connected with the lambent black metal of the sword, a foul stench, akin to the smell of burning, struck Elric's nostrils and the beast's scream broke off sharply.

Engaged with the remaining devil-dog, Elric caught a fleeting glimpse of the charred corpse. His horse was rearing high, lashing at the last alien animal with flailing hooves. The dog avoided the horse's attack and came at Elric's unguarded left side. The albino swung in the saddle and

brought his sword hurtling down to slice into the dog's skull and spill brains and blood on the wetly gleaming ground. Still somehow alive, the dog snapped feebly at Elric, but the Melnibonéan ignored its futile attack and turned his attention to the little man who had dispensed with one of his adversaries, but was having difficulty with the second. The dog had grasped the sabre with its beak, gripping the sword near the hilt.

Talons raked towards the little man's throat as he strove to shake the dog's grip. Elric charged forward, his rune-sword aimed like a lance to where the devil-dog dangled in mid-air, its talons slashing, trying to reach the flesh of its former quarry. *Stormbringer* caught the beast in its lower abdomen and ripped upwards, slitting the thing's underparts from crutch to throat. It released its hold on the small man's sabre and fell writhing to the ground. Elric's horse trampled it into the rocky ground. Breathing heavily, the albino sheathed *Stormbringer* and regarded the man he had saved warily. He disliked unnecessary contact with anyone and did not wish to be embarrassed by a display of emotion on the little man's part.

He was not disappointed, for the wide, ugly mouth split into a cheerful grin and the man bowed in the saddle as he returned his own curved blade to its scabbard.

"Thanks, good sir," he said lightly. "Without your help, the battle might have lasted longer. You deprived me of good sport, but you meant well. Moonglum is my name."

"Elric of Melniboné, I," replied the albino, but saw no reaction on the little man's face. This was strange, for the name of Elric was infamous throughout most of world. The story of his treachery and the slaying of his cousin Cymoril had been told and elaborated upon in every tavern in the civilised world. Much as he hated it, he was used to receiving some indication of recognition from those he met. His albinism was enough to mark him.

Intrigued by Moonglum's ignorance, and feeling strangely drawn towards the cocky little rider, Elric studied him in an effort to discover from what land he came. Moonglum wore no armour and his clothes were of faded blue material, travel-stained and worn. A stout leather belt carried the sabre, a dirk and a woollen purse. Upon his feet, Moonglum wore ankle-length boots of cracked leather. His horse-furni-

ture was much used but of obviously good quality. The man himself, seated high in the saddle, was barely more than five feet tall, with legs too long, in proportion, to the rest of his slight body. His nose was short and uptilted, beneath grey-green eyes, large and innocent-seeming. A mop of vivid red hair fell over his forehead and down his neck, unrestrained. He sat his horse comfortably, still grinning but looking now behind Elric to where Shaarilla rode to join them.

Moonglum bowed elaborately as the girl pulled her horse to a halt.

Elric said coldly, "The Lady Shaarilla—Master Moonglum of—?"

"Of Elwher," Moonglum supplied, "The mercantile capital of the East—the finest city on this planet."

Elric recognised the name. "So you are from Elwher, Master Moonglum. I have heard of the place. A young city, is it not? Some few centuries old. You have ridden far and sailed many seas."

"Indeed I have, sir. Without knowledge of the language used in these parts, the journey would have been harder, but luckily the slave who inspired me with tales of his homeland taught me the speech thoroughly."

"But why do you travel these parts—have you not heard the legends?" Shaarilla spoke incredulously.

"Those very legends were what brought me hence—and I'd begun to discount them, until those unpleasant pups set upon me. For what reason they decided to give chase, I will not know, for I gave them no cause to take a dislike to me. This is, indeed, a barbarous land."

Elric was uncomfortable. Light talk of the kind which Moonglum seemed to enjoy was contrary to his own brooding nature. But in spite of this, he found that he was liking the man more and more.

It was Moonglum who suggested that they travel together for a while. Shaarilla objected, giving Elric a warning glance, but he ignored it.

"Very well then, friend Moonglum, since three are stronger than two, we'd appreciate your company. We ride towards the mountains." Elric, himself, was feeling in a more cheerful mood.

"And what do you seek there?" Moonglum enquired.

"A secret." Elric said, and his new-found companion was discreet enough to drop the question.

three

So they rode, while the rainfall increased and splashed and sang among the rocks with the sky like dull steel above them and the wind crooning a dirge about their ears. Three small figures riding swiftly towards the black mountain barrier which rose over the world like a brooding God. And perhaps it was a God that laughed sometimes as they neared the foothills of the range, or perhaps it was the wind whistling through the dark mystery of canyons and precipices and the tumble of basalt and granite which climbed towards lonely peaks. Thunder clouds formed around those peaks and lightning smashed downwards like a monster finger searching the earth for grubs. Thunder rattled over the range and Shaarilla spoke her thoughts at last to Elric; spoke them as the mountains came in sight.

"Elric—let us go back, I beg you. Forget the Book—there are too many forces working against us. Take heed of the signs, Elric, or we are doomed!"

But Elric was grimly silent, for he had long been aware that the girl was losing her enthusiasm for the quest she had started.

"Elric—please. We will never reach the Book. Elric, turn back."

She rode beside him, pulling at his garments until impatiently he shrugged himself clear of her grasp and said:

"Too late, Shaarilla, I am intrigued too much to stop now. Either continue to lead the way—or tell me what you know and stay here. You desired to sample the Book's wisdom once—but now a few minor pitfalls on our journey have frightened you. What was it you needed to learn, Shaarilla?"

She did not answer him, but said instead: "And what was it you desired, Elric? Peace, you told me. Well, I warn you, you'll find no peace in those grim mountains—if we reach them at all."

"You have not been frank with me, Shaarilla," Elric said coldly, still looking ahead of him at the black peaks. "You know something of the forces seeking to stop us."

She shrugged. "It matters not—I know little. My father spoke a few vague warnings before he died, that is all."

"What did he say?"

"He said that He who guards the Book would use all his power to stop mankind from using its wisdom."

"What else?"

"Nothing else, Elric. But it is enough, now that I see that my father's warning was truly spoken. It was this guardian who killed him, Elric—or one of the guardian's minions. I do not wish to suffer that fate, in spite of what the book might do for me. I had thought you powerful enough to aid me—but now I doubt it."

"I have protected you so far," Elric said simply. "Now tell me what you seek from the Book?"

"I am too ashamed."

Elric did not press the question, but eventually she spoke softly, almost whispering. "I sought my wings," she said.

"Your wings—you mean the Book might give you a spell so that you could grow wings!" Elric smiled ironically. "And that is why you seek the vessel of the world's mightiest wisdom!"

"If you were thought deformed in your own land—it would seem important enough to you," she shouted defiantly.

Elric turned his face towards her, his crimson-irised eyes burning with a strange emotion. He put a hand to his dead white skin and a crooked smile twisted his lips. "I, too, have felt as you do," he said quietly. That was all he said and Shaarilla dropped behind him again, feeling somehow ashamed and wretched.

They rode on in silence until Moonglum, who had been riding discreetly ahead, cocked his overlarge skull on one side and suddenly drew rein.

Elric joined him. "What is it, Moonglum?"

"I hear horses coming this way," the little man said. "And voices which are disturbingly familiar. More of those devil-dogs, Elric—and this time accompanied by riders!"

Elric, too, heard the sounds, now, and shouted a warning to Shaarilla.

"Perhaps you were right," he called. "More trouble comes towards us."

"What now?" Moonglum said frowning.

"Ride for the mountains," Elric replied, "and we may yet outdistance them."

They spurred their steeds into a fast gallop and sped towards the hills.

But their flight was hopeless. Soon a black pack was visible on the horizon and the sharp birdlike baying of the devil-dogs drew nearer. Elric stared backward at their pursuers. Night was beginning to fall, and visibility was decreasing with every passing moment but he had a vague impression of the riders who raced behind the pack. They were swathed in dark cloaks and carried long spears. Their faces were invisible, lost in the shadow of the hoods which covered their heads.

Now Elric and his companions were forcing their horses up a steep incline, seeking the shelter of the rocks which lay above.

"We'll halt here," Elric ordered, "and try and hold them off. In the open they could easily surround us."

Moonglum nodded affirmatively, agreeing with the good sense contained in Elric's words. They pulled their sweating steeds to a standstill and prepared to join battle with the howling pack and their dark-cloaked masters.

Soon the first of the devil-dogs were rushing up the incline, their beak-jaws slavering and their talons rattling on stone. Standing between two rocks, blocking the way between with their bodies, Elric and Moonglum met the first attack and quickly dispatched three of the animals. Several more took the place of the dead and the first of the riders was visible behind them as night crept closer.

"Xiros!" swore Elric, suddenly recognising the riders. "These are the Lords of Dharzi—dead these ten centuries. We're fighting dead-men, Moonglum, and the too-tangible ghosts of their dogs. Unless I can think of a sorcerous means to defeat them, we're doomed!"

The zombie-men appeared to have no intention of taking part in the attack for the moment. They waited, their dead eyes eerily luminous, as the devil-dogs attempted to break through the singing network of steel with which Elric and his companion defended themselves. Elric was racking his brains—trying to dredge a spoken spell from his memory which would dismiss these living dead. Then it came to him, and hoping that the forces he had to invoke would decide to aid him, he began to chant:

*"Let the Laws which govern all things
Not so lightly be dismissed;
Let the Ones who flaunt the Earth Kings
With a fresher death be kissed."*

Nothing happened. "I've failed," Elric muttered hopelessly as he met the attack of a snapping devil-dog and spitted the thing on his sword.

But then—the ground rocked and seemed to *seethe* beneath the feet of the horses upon whose backs the dead men sat. The tremor lasted a few seconds and then subsided.

"The spell was not powerful enough," Elric sighed.

The earth trembled again and small craters formed in the ground of the hillside upon which the dead Lords of Dharzi impassively waited. Stones crumbled and the horses stamped nervously. Then the earth rumbled.

"Back!" yelled Elric warningly. "Back—or we'll go with them!" They retreated—backing towards Shaarilla and their waiting horses as the ground sagged beneath their feet. The Dharzi mounts were rearing and snorting and the remaining dogs turned nervously to regard their masters with puzzled, uncertain eyes. A low moan was coming from the lips of the living dead. Suddenly, a whole area of the surrounding hillside split into cracks, and yawning crannies appeared in the surface. Elric and his companions swung themselves on to their horses as, with a frightful multi-voiced scream, the dead Lords were swallowed by the earth, returning to the depths from which they had been summoned.

A deep unholy chuckle arose from the shattered pit. It was the mocking laughter of the Earth Kings taking their rightful prey back into their keeping. Whining, the devil-dogs slunk towards the edge of the pit, sniffing around it. Then, with one accord, the black pack hurled itself down into the chasm, following its masters to whatever cold doom awaited them.

Moonglum shuddered. "You are on familiar terms with the strangest people, friend Elric," he said shakily and turned his horse towards the mountains again.

They reached the black mountains on the following day and nervously Shaarilla led them along the rocky route she had memorised. She no longer pleaded with Elric to return—she was resigned to whatever fate awaited them. Elric's obsession was burning within him and he was filled with impatience—certain that he would find, at last, the ultimate truth of existence in the Dead God's Book. Moonglum was cheerfully sceptical, while Shaarilla was consumed with foreboding.

Rain still fell and the storm still growled and crackled above them. And, as the driving rainfall increased with fresh insistence, they came, at last, to the black, gaping mouth of a huge cave.

"I can lead you no further," Shaarilla said wearily. "The Book lies somewhere beyond the entrance to this cave."

Elric and Moonglum looked uncertainly at one another, neither of them sure what move to make next. To have reached their goal seemed somehow anticlimactic—for nothing blocked the cave entrance—and nothing appeared to guard it.

"It is inconceivable," said Elric, "that the dangers which beset us were not engineered by something, yet here we are—and no-one seeks to stop us entering. Are you sure that this is the *right* cave, Shaarilla?"

The girl pointed upwards to the rock above the entrance. Engraved in it was a curious symbol which Elric instantly recognised.

"The sign of Chaos!" Elric exclaimed. "Perhaps I should have guessed what we have become caught up in!"

"What does it mean, Elric?" Moonglum asked.

"That is the symbol of everlasting disruption and anarchy," Elric told him. "We are standing in territory presided over by the Lord of Entropy or one of his minions. So that is who our enemy is! This can only mean one thing—the book is of extreme importance to the order of things on this planet—possibly the galaxy—or the entire universe!"

Moonglum stared at him in puzzlement. The two latter terms meant nothing to him. "What do you mean, Elric?"

"It is believed by many sorcerers and philosophers that two forces govern the universe—fighting an eternal battle," Elric replied. "These two forces are termed Law and Chaos. These are values supposedly set above the qualities men call Good and Evil. The upholders of Chaos state that in such a world as they rule, all things are possible. Opponents of Chaos—those who ally themselves with the forces of Law—say that without Law *nothing* material is possible.

"I, like most sorcerers, stand apart, believing that a balance between the two is the proper state of things. However, I can see now that we have become embroiled in a dispute between the two forces. The book is valuable to either faction, obviously, and I could guess that the minions of Entropy are worried what power we might release if we

obtain this Book. They are supposed to be governed by some Code which prohibits them from interfering directly in Men's lives—that is why we have not been aware of their presence. Now perhaps, I will discover at last the answer to the one question which concerns me—does an ultimate force rule over the opposing factions of Law and Chaos?"

Elric stepped through the cave entrance, peering into the gloom while the others hesitantly followed him.

"The cave stretches back a long way. All we can do is press on until we find its far wall," Elric said.

"Let's hope that its far wall lies not *downwards*," Moon-glum said ironically as he motioned Elric to lead on.

They stumbled forward as the cave grew darker and darker. Their voices were magnified and hollow to their own ears as the floor of the cave slanted sharply down.

"This is no cave," Elric whispered, "it's a *tunnel*—but I cannot guess where it leads."

For several hours they pressed onwards in pitch darkness, clinging to one another as they reeled forward, uncertain of their footing and still aware that they were moving down a gradual incline. They lost all sense of time and Elric began to feel as if he were living through a dream. Events seemed to have become so unpredictable and beyond his control that he could no longer cope with thinking about them in ordinary terms. The tunnel was long and dark and wide and cold. It offered no comfort and the floor eventually became the only thing which had any reality. It was firm beneath his feet. He began to feel that possibly he was not moving—that the floor, after all, was moving and he was remaining stationary. His companions clung to him but he was not aware of them. He was lost and his brain was numb. Sometimes he swayed and felt that he was on the edge of a precipice. Sometimes he fell and his groaning body met hard stone, disproving the proximity of the gulf down which he half-expected to fall.

All the while he made his legs perform walking motions, even though he was not at all sure whether he was actually moving forward. And time meant nothing—became a meaningless concept with relation to nothing.

Until, at last, he was aware of a faint, blue glow ahead of him and he knew that he had been moving forward. He began to run down the incline, but found that he was going

too fast and had to check his speed. There was a scent of alien strangeness in the cool air of the cave tunnel and fear was a fluid force which surged over him, something separate from himself.

The others obviously felt it, too, for though they said nothing, Elric could sense it. Slowly they moved downward, drawn like automatons towards the pale blue glow below them.

And then they were out of the tunnel, staring awestruck at the unearthly vision which confronted them. Above them, the very air seemed of the strange blue colour which had originally attracted them. They were standing on a jutting slab of rock and, although it was still somehow *dark*, the eery blue glow illuminated a stretch of glinting silver beach beneath them. And the beach was lapped by a surging dark sea which moved restlessly like a liquid giant in disturbed slumber. Scattered along the silver beach were the dim shapes of wrecks—the bones of peculiarly designed boats, each of a different pattern from the rest. The sea surged away into darkness and there was no horizon—only blackness. Behind them, they could see a sheer cliff which was also lost in darkness beyond a certain point. And it was cold—bitterly cold, with an unbelievable sharpness. For though the sea threshed beneath them, there was no dampness in the air—no smell of salt. It was a bleak and awesome sight and, apart from the sea, they were the only things that moved—the only things to make sound, for the sea was horribly silent in its restless movement.

“What now, Elric?” whispered Moonglum, shivering.

Elric shook his head and they continued to stand there for a long time until the albino—his white face and hands ghastly in the alien light said: “Since it is impracticable to return—we shall venture over the sea.”

His voice was hollow and he spoke as one who was unaware of his words.

Steps, cut into the living rock, led down towards the beach and now Elric began to descend them. The others allowed him to lead them staring around them, their eyes lit by a terrible fascination.

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Their feet profaned the silence as they reached the silver beach of crystalline stones and crunched across it. Elric's crimson eyes fixed upon one of the objects littering the beach and he smiled. He shook his head savagely from side to side, as if to clear it. Trembling, he pointed to one of the boats, and the pair saw that it was intact, unlike the others. It was yellow and red—vulgarly gay in this environment and nearing it they observed that it was made of wood, yet unlike any wood they had seen. Moonglum ran his stubby fingers along its length.

"Hard as iron," he breathed. "No wonder it has not rotted as the others have." He peered inside and shuddered. "Well the owner won't argue if we take it," he said wryly.

Elric and Shaarilla understood him when they saw the unnaturally twisted skeleton which lay at the bottom of the boat. Elric reached inside and pulled the thing out, hurling it on to the stones. It rattled and rolled over the gleaming shingle, disintegrating as it did so, scattering bones over a wide area. The skull came to rest by the edge of the beach, seeming to stare sightlessly out over the disturbing ocean.

As Elric and Moonglum strove to push and pull the boat down the beach towards the sea, Shaarilla moved ahead of them and squatted down, putting her hand into the wetness. She stood up sharply, shaking the stuff from her hand.

"This is not water as I know it," she said. They heard her, but said nothing.

"We'll need a sail," Elric murmured. The cold breeze was moving out over the ocean. "A cloak should serve." He stripped off his cloak and knotted it to the mast of the vessel. "Two of us will have to hold this at either edge," he said. "That way we'll have some slight control over the direction the boat takes. It's makeshift—but the best we can manage."

They shoved off, taking care not to get their feet in the sea.

The wind caught the sail and pushed the boat out over the ocean, moving at a faster pace than Elric had at first reckoned. The boat began to hurtle forward as if possessed of its own volition and Elric's and Moonglum's muscles ached as they clung to the bottom ends of the sail.

Soon the silver beach was out of sight and they could see little—the pale blue light above them scarcely penetrating

the blackness. It was then that they heard the dry flap of wings over their heads and looked up.

Silently descending were three massive apelike creatures, borne on great leathery wings. Shaarilla recognised them and gasped.

"Clakars!"

Moonglum shrugged as he hurriedly drew his sword—"A name only—what are they?" But he received no answer for the leading winged ape descended with a rush, mouthing and gibbering, showing long fangs in a slavering snout. Moonglum dropped his portion of the sail and slashed at the beast but it veered away, its huge wings beating, and sailed upwards again.

Elric unsheathed *Stormbringer*—and was astounded. The blade remained silent, its familiar howl of glee muted. The blade shuddered in his hand and instead of the rush of power which usually flowed up his arm, he felt only a slight tingling. He was panic-stricken for a moment—without the sword, he would soon lose all vitality. Grimly fighting down his fear, he used the sword to protect himself from the rushing attack of one of the winged apes.

The ape gripped the blade, bowling Elric over, but it yelled in pain as the blade cut through one knotted hand, severing fingers which lay twitching and bloody on the narrow deck. Elric gripped the side of the boat and hauled himself upright once more. Shrilling its agony, the winged ape attacked again, but this time with more caution. Elric summoned all his strength and swung the heavy sword in a two-handed grip, ripping off one of the leathery wings so that the mutilated beast flopped about the deck. Judging the place where its heart should be, Elric drove the blade in under the breast-bone. The ape's movements subsided.

Moonglum was lashing wildly at two of the winged apes which were attacking him from both sides. He was down on one knee, vainly hacking at random. He had opened up the whole side of a beast's head but, though in pain, it still came at him. Elric hurled *Stormbringer* through the darkness and it struck the wounded beast in the throat, point first. The ape clutched with clawing fingers at the steel and fell overboard. Its corpse floated on the liquid but slowly began to sink. Elric grabbed with frantic fingers at the hilt of his sword, reaching far over the side of the boat. Incredibly, the blade was sinking with the beast. Knowing *Stormbringer's*

properties as he did, Elric was amazed—once when he had hurled the runesword into the ocean, it had refused to sink. Now it was being dragged beneath the surface as any ordinary blade would be dragged. He gripped the hilt and hauled the sword out of the winged ape's carcass.

His strength was seeping swiftly from him. It was incredible. What alien laws governed this cavern world? He could not guess—and all he was concerned with was regaining his waning strength. Without the runesword's power, this was impossible!

Moonglum's curved blade had disembowelled the remaining beast and the little man was busily tossing the dead thing over the side. He turned, grinning triumphantly, to Elric.

"A good fight," he said.

Elric shook his head. "We must cross this sea speedily," he replied, "else we're lost—finished. My power is gone."

"How? Why?"

"I know not—unless the forces of Entropy rule more strongly here. Make haste—there is no time for speculation."

Moonglum's eyes were disturbed. He could do nothing but act as Elric said.

Elric was trembling in his weakness, holding the billowing sail with draining strength. Shaarilla moved to help him, her thin hands close to his; her deep-set eyes bright with sympathy.

"What *were* those things?" Moonglum gasped, his teeth naked and white beneath his back-drawn lips, his breath coming short.

"Clakars," Shaarilla replied. "They are the primeval ancestors of my people, older in origin than recorded time. My people are thought the oldest inhabitants of this planet."

"Whoever seeks to stop us in this quest of yours had best find some—original means." Moonglum grinned. "The old methods don't work." But the other two did not smile, for Elric was half-fainting and the woman was concerned only with his plight. Moonglum shrugged, staring ahead.

When he spoke again, sometime later, his voice was excited. "We're nearing land!"

Land it was, and they were travelling fast towards it. Too fast. Elric heaved himself upright and spoke heavily and with difficulty. "Drop the sail!" Moonglum obeyed him. The boat sped on, struck another stretch of silver beach and

ground up it, the prow ploughing a dark scar through the glinting shingle. It stopped suddenly, tilting violently to one side so that the three were tumbled against the boat's rail.

Shaarilla and Moonglum pulled themselves upright and dragged the limp and nerveless albino on to the beach. Carrying him between them, they struggled up the beach until the crystalline shingle gave way to thick, fluffy moss, padding their footfalls. They laid the albino down and stared at him worriedly, uncertain of their next actions.

Elric strained to rise, but was unable to do so. "Give me time," he gasped. "I won't die—but already my eyesight is fading. I can only hope that the blade's power will return on dry land."

With a mighty effort, he pulled *Stormbringer* from its scabbard and he smiled in relief as the evil runesword moaned faintly and then, slowly, its song increased in power as black flame flickered along its length. Already the power was flowing into Elric's body, giving him renewed vitality. But even as strength returned, Elric's crimson eyes flared with terrible misery.

"Without this black blade," he groaned, "I am nothing, as you see. But what is it making of me? Am I to be bound to it for ever?"

The others did not answer him and they were both moved by an emotion they could not define—an emotion blended of fear, hate and pity—linked with something else . . .

Eventually, Elric rose, trembling, and silently led them up the mossy hillside towards a more natural light which filtered from above. They could see that it came from a wide chimney, leading apparently to the upper air. By means of the light, they could soon make out a dark, irregular shape which towered in the shadow of the gap.

As they neared the shape, they saw that it was a castle of black stone—a sprawling pile covered with dark green crawling lichen which curled over its ancient bulk with an almost sentient protectiveness. Towers appeared to spring at random from it and it covered a vast area. There seemed to be no windows in any part of it and the only orifice was a rearing doorway blocked by thick bars of a metal which glowed with dull redness, but without heat. Above this gate, in flaring amber, was the sign of the Lord of Entropy, representing eight arrows radiating from a central hub in all

directions. It appeared to hang in the air without touching the black, lichen-covered stone.

"I think our quest ends here," Elric said grimly. "Here, or nowhere."

"Before I go further, Elric, I'd like to know what it is you seek," Moonglum murmured. "I think I've earned the right."

"A book," Elric said carelessly. "The Dead Gods' Book. It lies within those castle walls—of that I'm certain. We have reached the end of our journey."

Moonglum shrugged. "I might not have asked," he smiled, "for all your words mean to me. I hope that I will be allowed some small share of whatever treasure it represents."

Elric grinned, in spite of the coldness which gripped his bowels, but he did not answer Moonglum.

"We need to enter the castle, first," he said instead.

As if the gates had heard him, the metal bars flared to a pale green and then their glow faded back to red and finally dulled into non-existence. The entrance was unbarred and their way apparently clear.

"I like not *that*," growled Moonglum. "Too easy. A trap awaits us—are we to spring it at the pleasure of whoever dwells inside the castle confines?"

"What else can we do?" Elric spoke quietly.

"Go back—or forward. Avoid the castle—do not tempt He who guards the Book!" Shaarilla was gripping the albino's right arm, her whole face moving with fear, her eyes pleading. "Forget the Book, Elric!"

"Now?" Elric laughed humourlessly. "Now—after this journey? No, Shaarilla, not when the truth is so close. Better to die than never to have tried to secure the wisdom in the Book when it lies so near."

Shaarilla's clutching fingers relaxed their grip and her shoulders slumped in hopelessness. "We cannot do battle with the minions of Entropy . . ."

"Perhaps we will not have to." Elric did not believe his own words but his mouth was twisted with some dark emotion, intense and terrible. Moonglum glanced at Shaarilla.

"Shaarilla is right," he said with conviction. "You'll find nothing but bitterness, possibly death, inside those castle walls. Let us, instead, climb yonder steps and attempt to

reach the surface." He pointed to some twisting steps which led towards the yawning rent in the cavern roof.

Elric shook his head. "No. You go if you like."

Moonglum grimaced in perplexity. "You're a stubborn one, friend Elric. Well, if it's all or nothing—then I'm with you. But personally, I have always preferred compromise."

Elric began to walk slowly forward towards the dark entrance of the bleak and towering castle.

In a wide, shadowy courtyard a tall figure, wreathed in scarlet fire, stood awaiting them.

Elric marched on, passing through the gateway. Moon-glum and Shaarilla nervously followed.

Gusty laughter roared from the mouth of the giant and the scarlet fire fluttered about him. He was naked and unarmed, but the power which flowed from him almost forced the three back. His skin was scaly and of smoky purple colouring. His massive body was alive with rippling muscle as he rested lightly on the balls of his feet. His skull was long, slanting sharply backwards at the forehead and his eyes were like slivers of blue steel, showing no pupil. His whole body shook with mighty, malicious joy.

"Greetings to you, Lord Elric of Melniboné—I congratulate you for your remarkable tenacity!"

"Who are you?" Elric growled, his hand on his sword.

"My name is Orunlu the Keeper and this is a stronghold of the Lord of Entropy." The giant smiled cynically. "You pride yourself on your control over a few nature spirits—you need not finger your puny blade so nervously, for you should know that I cannot harm you now."

"So it is true—the minions of Law and Chaos have no power over Men?" Elric's voice betrayed his mounting excitement. "You cannot stop us?"

"I do not dare to—since my oblique efforts have failed. But your foolish endeavours perplex me somewhat, I'll admit. The Book is of importance to us—but what can it mean to you? I have guarded it for three hundred centuries and have never been curious enough to seek to discover why my Masters place so much importance upon it—why they bothered to rescue it on its sunward course and incarcerate it on this boring ball of eath populated by the capering, briefly-lived clowns you call Men?"

"I seek in it the Truth," Elric said guardedly, feeling foolish.

"*There is no Truth but that of Eternal struggle,*" the scarlet-flamed giant said with conviction.

"What rules above the forces of Law and Chaos?" Elric asked. "What controls your destinies as it controls mine?"

The giant frowned.

"*That question, I cannot answer. I do not know.*"

"Then perhaps the Book will tell us both," Elric said purposefully. "Let me pass—tell me where it lies."

The giant moved back, smiling ironically. "*It lies in a small chamber in the central tower. I have sworn never to venture there, otherwise I might even lead the way. Go if you like—my duty is over.*"

Elric, Moonglum and Shaarilla stepped towards the entrance of the castle, but before they entered, the giant spoke warningly from behind them.

"*I have been told that the knowledge contained in the Book could swing the balance on the side of the forces of Law. This disturbs me—but, it appears, there is another possibility which disturbs me even more.*"

"What is that?" Elric said.

"*It could create such a tremendous impact on the universe that complete entropy would result. My Masters do not desire that—for it could mean the destruction of all matter in the end. We exist only to fight—not to win, but to preserve the eternal struggle.*"

"I care not," Elric told him. "I have little to lose, Orunlu the Keeper."

"Then go." The giant strode across the courtyard into blackness.

Inside the tower, light of a pale quality illuminated winding steps leading upwards. Elric began to climb them in silence, moved by his own doom-filled purpose. Hesitantly, Moonglum and Shaarilla followed in his path, their faces set in hopeless acceptance.

On and upward the steps mounted, twisting tortuously towards their goal, until at last they came to the chamber, full of blinding light, many-coloured and scintillating, which did not penetrate outwards at all but remained confined to the room which housed it.

Blinking, shielding his red eyes with his arm, Elric pressed forward and, through slitted pupils saw the source of the light lying on a small stone dais in the centre of the room.

Equally troubled by the bright light, Shaarilla and Moon-glum followed him into the room and stood in awe at what what they saw.

It was a huge book—the Dead Gods' Book, its covers encrusted with alien gems from which the light sprang. It gleamed, it *throbbed* with light and brilliant colour.

"At last," Elric breathed, "At last—the Truth!"

He stumbled forward like a man made stupid with drink, his pale hands reaching for the thing he had sought with such savage bitterness. His hands touched the pulsating cover of the Book and, trembling, turned it back.

"Now, I shall learn," he said, half-gloatingly.

With a crash, the cover fell to the floor, sending the bright gems skipping and dancing over the paving stones.

Beneath Elric's twitching hands lay nothing but a pile of yellowish dust.

"No!" His scream was anguished, unbelieving. "No!" Tears flowed down his contorted face as he ran his hands through the fine dust. With a groan which racked his whole being, he fell forward, his face hitting the disintegrated parchment. Time had destroyed the Book—untouched, possibly forgotten, for three hundred centuries. Even the wise and powerful Gods who had created it had perished—and now its knowledge followed them into oblivion, or whatever had awaited them beyond the physical universe.

They stood on the slopes of the high mountain, staring down into the green valleys below them. The sun shone and the sky was clear and blue. Behind them lay the gaping hole which led into the bowels of the earth and the stronghold of the Lord of Entropy on their planet.

Elric looked with sad eyes across the world and his head was lowered beneath the weight of weariness and dark despair which lay upon him. He had not spoken since his companions had dragged him sobbing from the chamber of the Book. Now he raised his head and all the misery of the world showed upon his pale face. He spoke in a voice tinged with self-mockery, sharp with bitterness—a lonely voice like the calling of hungry seabirds circling cold skies above bleak shores.

"Now," he said, "I will live my life without ever knowing why I live it—whether it has purpose or not. Perhaps the book could have told me. But would I have believed it, even then? I am the eternal sceptic—never *sure* that my actions are my own; never certain that an ultimate entity is not guiding me."

"I envy those who know. All I can do now is to continue my quest and hope, without hope, that before my span is ended, the Truth will be presented to me."

Shaarilla took his limp hands in hers and her eyes were wet.

"Elric—let me comfort you."

The albino sneered bitterly. "Would that we'd never met, Shaarilla of the Dancing Mist. For a while, you gave me hope—I had thought to be at last at peace with myself. But, because of you, I am left more hopeless than before. There is no salvation in this world—only malevolent doom. Goodbye."

He took his hands away from her grasp and set off down the mountainside.

Moonglum darted a glance at Shaarilla and then at Elric. He took something from his purse and put it in the girl's hand.

"Good luck," he said, and then he was running after Elric until he caught him up.

Still striding, Elric turned at Moonglum's approach and, despite his brooding misery said: "What is it, friend Moonglum? Why do you follow me?"

"I've followed you thus far, Master Elric, and I see no reason to stop," grinned the little man. "Besides, unlike yourself, I'm a materialist. We'll need to eat, you know."

Elric frowned, feeling a warmth growing within him. "What do you mean, Moonglum?"

Moonglum chuckled. "I take advantage of situations of any kind, where I may," he answered. He reached into his purse and displayed something on his outstretched hand which shone with a dazzling brilliancy. It was one of the jewels from the cover of the Book. "There are more in my purse," he said, "And each one worth a fortune." He took Elric's arm.

"Come, Elric—what new lands shall we visit so that we may change these baubles into wine and pleasant company?"

Behind them, still standing stock still on the hillside, Shaarilla stared miserably after them until they were no longer visible. The jewel Moonglum had given her dropped from her nerveless fingers and fell, bouncing and bright, until it was lost amongst the heather. Then she turned—and the dark mouth of the cavern yawned before her.

—Michael Moorcock

John Kippax writes a strange little "once-upon-a-time" story—it could well fit into the Arabian Nights—of the transmutation of gold, and the King who was willing to sacrifice anything (even his wife) to the sorcerer who could accomplish the miracle.

REFLECTION OF THE TRUTH

BY JOHN KIPPAX

When a man thinks he has lost his wife, it is a terrible moment. When, like me, he is incapable of swift physical action, then it is a frustrating moment indeed.

But, alas, I cannot move fast ; those who know me are often surprised that I can continue to show tourists round Cimojdin castle, day after day, with this stiff leg. But the pain diminishes when I remember that I got it in the resistance, during the Occupation, and that, really, it is a badge of honour. I try to be a modest man though, and I only wear my Hero of the Republic medal on special days. Mostly, I am just Lazlo Janaček, castle guide. My friends call me 'Historian Janaček,' for I have long studied our country's history, and once, I lectured at the university.

It is not bad, being a guide, now that the tourists from the west are coming in increasing numbers ; I admit to being tired

after a full two-and-a-half-hour tour of the castle, but if the tips are good and they like my work, then I am satisfied.

Yes, that tires me—but I never felt more tired than I do at this moment. That is why I am sitting here, between the great suit of armour of the Grand Duke Rudolf, and the equally fine outfit of Otto the First, with my stiff old leg stretched out in front of me, waiting for the strength to get up and carry on. Above me, pencils of sunlight strike through the high mullions, lining the great corridor with scutcheons of gold, limning the ancient banners as they jut from the grey walls which have known so much splendour and pomp and blood and terror.

Had I been a king who ruled from Cimojdin castle, I might have no problem now.

As you know, the revolution came soon after the end of the war. Do not ask me much about it. Fortunately, I had a good war record and no political history at all. I got my job here through Stepanek, an old friend who looked me up after an absence of several years. On that occasion, he brought with him his daughter Jovanka.

She was twenty-eight, when we first met, and I was a grey forty-four. Why she was drawn to me, I cannot say, but you have only to see her to understand why I was attracted to the plump, black haired beauty of Stepanek's daughter. We were married six months after our first meeting.

Why did she marry me? Perhaps it was for safety; but she could love, with enough fire for two, and she was good in so many ways. She used to taunt me a little about my job, and my studies, and declare that I thought more of the castle than I did of her. But she knew that those studies would pay off, with the tourists. To this end, also, I practised a style of delivery which I think I have perfected, giving the facts, sometimes a little decorated, in a dryly humorous or sardonic manner; this has become almost a part of me.

So, Jovanka and I lived together for three years. There were no children; I never spoke of this disappointment, and, after all, she had freedom to visit relatives, to keep the house spotless and so on.

Last month, her father died. I was with him at the end. I remember a curious remark he made, when my wife was out of the room.

He said, weakly, "Lazlo, is she behaving herself, now?"

I assured him that she was, and I thought no more of it, until a few minutes ago.

Jovanka had been away, visiting an aunt in Brno ; it was the height of the season, and I had been very busy. I did two full tours yesterday, and I felt it, I can tell you. This afternoon I had an easy party, where I only had to keep switching from English to French. As we neared the end of the journey, at the spot along here where I tell them the story of the terrible bedroom of Ladislav the Third, and show it to them, I was aware, as we came out, of a smiling face watching me. It was Jovanka ; she had returned by an earlier train, and had come up to the castle, tacking herself on to the tourists, and listening to me do my stuff.

When the tourists had gone, I came and sat down here, tired, and she came and sat by me, and stroked my hair and kissed me. After three days it was wonderful to be near her again, to smell her perfume and her soft body scent.

"Lazlo. That story of Ladislav and his queen. I never knew that."

"You are an ignorant peasant girl," I said, and kissed her. "How was your aunt?"

"Getting better. Quite comfortable, in fact. That *story*."

"We are a weird people."

As she gazed at me with her great dark eyes, the corners of her mouth twitched deliciously.

"Working here has put a spell on you. Why not get out of it, for a while?"

"Really, little one? And who would find the money for the food on the table, and all those nice things that Madame Janacek wears for the delight of her husband?"

She rose lightly and said, "Well, now that I am here, I will go and stand where Ladislav stood."

She blew me a kiss, and walked away, and I watched the swing of her hips, and thought how lucky I was. She waved as she walked into the room.

Perhaps you do not know the story?

There was once a king of Bohemia, who never doubted the goodness and virtue of his queen. This was a good thing, for, on those days, when virtue was doubted, action tended to be swift and violent, with heads rolling first and recriminations of a lighter kind coming a long way after. Virtue was so highly thought of in this province, that no court would convict a man for summarily disposing of his wife and her lover on the spot ; he might choose his method, a sword and a good right arm, or

one of the new and impartially dangerous contraptions called firearms. If, on any occasion, it so happened that the lover was the stronger, then, on the husband's claim being fairly proved (assuming that the lover had left him in one piece) the lover had to pay a large fine, and be pelted in the stocks. The wife, however, was considered the greater sinner in such cases. She was paraded through the streets of the city on market day in one of the city muckcarts, stripped, and with a card round her neck bearing one single blunt word of Teutonic origin.

At this time there was a feverish search throughout Europe for the philosopher's stone, that wondrous thing which transmutes base metals into gold, and rich indeed was the man who appeared able to do it—for as long as his illusion lasted. But when his patron discovered that here was but one more character doing his legerdemain with gilt, or using pyrites, or merely salting with real gold, then swift was the sorcerer's descent from the heights of court or palace, down to those dark chambers well below ground, where, by the light of torches, the fallen magicians sobbed out their last breath on the rack, or met death with despairing screams as the iron maiden took them to her block and hellish embrace.

This king of Bohemia, Ladislav, the third of that name, had a young queen named Violetta, a comely woman who was, so it was said, an Italian princess before her marriage. Her dark, olive-skinned grace, her many accomplishments, were a wonder. As time went on, they became more than a wonder—became, in fact, rather more than many ladies of the court could bear with equanimity. It was good that a lady should be able to embroider, to paint, to write poems, to cook, to dance, to arrange flowers, to play the viol-de-gamboys, to sing, to compose music, to speak Latin and Greek and Spanish and Russian. For a lady to do one, two, or even three of these things was good and proper; but, for a lady to do them all, and well at that, savoured of nothing more than vulgar ostentation.

At the time of what came to be called 'The Skimalis Affair,' the king had been on the throne for three years, succeeding his father after that worthy but somewhat obtuse man had reigned for a quarter of a century. During the three years, things happened with some speed. Ladislav III, a noted warrior and swordsman, put down a serfs' rebellion with incredible ferocity, collected taxes which no one had been able to collect for years, killed three powerful and obstreperous barons, one of whom he

personally executed in the town square of Cimojdin, and reiterated his belief that the fine old custom of publicly shaming all unfaithful women should be carried out with the utmost rigour.

To prove his point the king, his hands still dripping with the far-spurled blood of the executee, had brought before him the wife of one of his nobles, who had been caught in flagrante delicto disporting herself with one of the court pages, a fine big lad with aspirations beyond his years or station. His majesty personally disrobed her, shaved her head, and then flogged her with a whip. After which he hung round her neck the card bearing the short word of Teutonic origin.

King Ladislas was a big man, broad, with fair skin and hair of a fiery redness which was unusual for that part of Europe. This made it all the more unusual that there should be such a number of red haired children and young people in the town, their ages ranging from about eighteen to mere mewling babes. Anyone who cared to risk his life remarking on the fact, might also have observed that their mothers had, for the most part, at one time been good looking serving wenches at Cimojdin castle. But this could have been simple coincidence, of course. It was well known that his young and virile majesty, (he was then thirty-two) was a great believer in the utmost rectitude for all those who served him.

Her Majesty Queen Violetta, who was then twenty-four, had born the king four sons, with their mother's good looks and their father's hefty proportions. And yet, to the annoyance of the court ladies, the queen retained her girlish figure, her grace and beauty and many accomplishments. She seemed not to notice their irritation, speaking their language always very charmingly, and with more fluency than the natives themselves could muster. Whenever the king sought to chide her, she was ready with cooing words of such tenderness that his majesty was instantly soothed.

Once he said to her : " Violetta, should you wear such a slashing décolletage all the time ? I have noticed that, while most of the lords stare fixedly past you—as, indeed, they had better—the ladies frown in disapproval, and some of the bigger pages grow quite red. That reminds me—we ought to have more light on the kitchen stairs."

" My lord," replied his queen, " surely my style of dress reminds you, the father of my four fine sons, that with all my

responsibilities, I still try to remain the charmer you married ? Do I not serve as an example to other men's wives that they should keep their husbands virtuous ?"

But, King Ladislas was not content. It was a matter of cash. At this point in the history of the country there began that doleful procession of quacks and charlatans to the castle, followed by the successive descent of all comers down to the dungeons and the hands of the torturers. The king grew angry, and one day his anger boiled over when he saw that his Violetta had ordered herself yet another gown of gold lame trimmed with ermine and diamonds.

"Does Her Majesty know," he asked, with what he imagined to be irony, "does Her Majesty *know*," said he, louder, "that this kingdom of mine is almost without funds ? Is Her Majesty so bereft of common sense that, in the face of my order, she continues to indulge ?"

Violetta opened her mouth to reply, but the king, knowing how persuasive she could be, got in another quick volley.

"Return that confection to the varlet who made it," he roared, "and see that he is told that if he is fool enough to send so much as a button without my approval, he will be flogged, flayed alive and hung in chains !"

At this the beautiful Violetta gazed at him with round dark eyes for a couple of seconds, and then fled the room with one superbly timed sob.

Much later that evening, in the warm and scented confines of the royal bedchamber, Ladislas found that, instead of reproaching him, his queen snuggled up to him (she was the most charming of snugglers) and said :

"My lord, I have been thinking. Perhaps there is someone who can help us."

The king ceased his reflective fondling.

"You can ? Who is this person ?"

"A philosopher and sorcerer who once came to the court, at Ancona. A German, I believe, named Skimalis. I am sure he could do as you asked."

The king's hopes were raised, but they sank again.

"He will have been snapped up," he returned, gloomily. "Fellows like that—"

"I do not think he seeks a permanent situation."

"What is this fellow like ?"

"He is all things to all men," she answered, "and he has great magic."

"Tell me more, my love," he said tenderly, "and come closer."

His queen hastened to show that this was possible.

The next morning, the king, having breakfasted upon a haunch of venison and a mug of imported slivovitz, said to his queen :

"My dear, how may we summon this Skimalis?"

Violetta, looking very fetching in an orange and purple gown of precipitous décolletage, lowered her long lashes and murmured :

"He will come, dear Ladislas, if I call him."

The king, who had taken magic and demonology as a subsidiary subject at the university, realised that this fellow must have very superior magic. He did not give a thought for the submissiveness of the queen, who had not reproached him for his sharpness of the previous day.

"Then pray call him at once."

She rose and went out on to the balcony, which faced into the newly risen sun. The king followed her, and watched her raise her arms, close her eyes, and murmur three times :

"Skimalis, Violette needs you."

Ladislas fingered his flaming beard and stared at the sun through slitted green eyes.

"No sign of him—" he began to say, when, out of the orb and travelling very low and fast, there materialised a small black cloud, no bigger than the first puff which rises from the fire newly kindled beneath the screaming victim at a burning. Rapidly approaching, it passed over the town and then arrowed up towards the heights of the castle. A second later, it alighted upon the rail of the balcony.

From it stepped Skimalis.

Here is an important point. When the king looked on Skimalis, he saw a withered, long-nosed raddle-skinned old vagrant, with precariously perched spectacles, a doublet which had once been black but was now green with age, the whole effect being of decay and disrepair. When Violetta looked, she saw a young, strong, golden haired man, clad in silks and satins, with a jewelled sword, a plumed hat, and a devilish gleam in his eye.

"Greetings, noble ones," said Skimalis.

The king heard a croaking old voice, while the queen heard the vibrant tones of a young man.

"You are Skimalis the sorcerer?" asked the king. He was aware that here was power such as he had never seen before.

The other bowed.

"Please come in," said Ladislas.

Skimalis held up his hand.

"One moment. Are there mirrors in this room, and elsewhere?"

"There are many," returned the king. "Why do you ask?"

"Your queen has called me, therefore I am needed for work here. But where I work, there can be no mirrors. It is vital that they be all removed. *All*. Glass can imprison me, hold me living for all eternity. A silvered glass is abomination to me and all those I hold dear. It is thus with all those who are sons of a troll and wili."

"What is the last one?" asked Violetta, gazing at the beautiful young man.

"Yes, what is it?" asked Ladislas, looking at old Skimalis.

"A wili is an earthwoman who is betrothed, but who dies before she can be married."

At these words the sunlight seemed to bend back from the trio, so that, for a moment, the balcony was in darkness as thick as hell. Then the light returned.

The king gave orders about the mirrors, and when the work was done, he took Skimalis to his apartments. Ladislas thought that such a powerful person should have only the best. And His Majesty, accompanying the sorcerer along the corridors, wondered why the women gazed at the wizened creature so lovingly.

Ladislas said to his queen that night :

"The old fellow seems in reasonable good health, and comfortable. He says that he will start work, tomorrow, if the signs are right. What do you think of him?"

She did not tell her husband what she saw when she looked at Skimalis. There were reasons. Firstly, she remembered his sharpness about the gold lame gown ; secondly, and much more important, she found it increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that there was one code of behaviour for her, and another much easier one for the king. She thought of her four sons, and then of the red-haired brats which were still appearing about the castle and the town, springing from some quite

unlikely mothers. (Ladislav is still known as the father of his people).

So she said, very softly : " I think he will do well for us, my love."

And, more than this, the queen would not say. She suddenly became very drowsy.

The sorcerer set up a small laboratory in which he installed retorts, and crucibles, and a great forced draught fire which roared with small thunder. He asked for a quantity of lead, very fresh and pure, in order to try his skill in the new surroundings. At first he did not want anyone else present, but the king had been had before, and was worried about giving the torturers more work to do. He had his pride, King Ladislav. It was a matter of deep principle for the king—that anyone who failed him should suffer. Thus, he insisted on being present, and Skimalis consented with a scowl.

It is awesomely recorded by Vanya, the court scribe of the time that, after about an hour's work of which the king understood not the smallest part, approximately five kilos of gold resulted from about the same amount of lead. The king was so delighted that he actually executed a jig in the presence of the wonder worker.

" I will send for tons and tons of lead !" he cried. " I will strip the country of it, I will buy abroad, and you shall turn it all into gold !"

An old Skimalis (as he appeared to the king) sat, without emotion, his eyes watchful.

" How will you pay for what I can do ?" he asked.

The king stopped his jigging in mid hop.

" H'm ?" he rubbed his beard. " Lands ?"

Skimalis shook his head.

" Jewels, then ?"

For answer, Skimalis took a few pebbles and cast them on the ground, where, to the dismay of Ladislav III, they burned and glowed with fire, transformed into rubies.

" There are limits to my powers," he said, in a smooth voice, " but these things are easily done."

" Well, then ?" The king was uneasy—a new feeling to him. He was so used to being at the fore when there was action needed, and now, he was at a loss.

Skimalis' eyes were brightly evil.

"What I have done, so far, has expended my power. I need a source of new power, something of priceless value, to enable me to carry on."

"Such as?" asked the king, his temper giving him a nudge.

"A very beautiful woman."

The king relaxed.

"Easy!" he said. "I will have fifty of our finest paraded tomorrow morning, and you can take your pick. Will that do for a start?"

Now the sorcerer's tone was faintly menacing.

"You do not quite follow," he said, "I need a specially beautiful woman."

"I do follow," returned His Majesty, a shade tartly. "If necessary, I will round up the wives of my nobles for your inspection. They should be willing to make this sacrifice." The king swelled. "They *will* be willing! You need power from a beautiful woman, and you shall have it, by Wenceslas!"

"Let me specific," put in the other. "I require the assistance of Her Majesty Queen Violetta."

The king's sword was half out of its sheath before he stayed its course: the suggestion took his breath away! And then he realised that he had been trapped by his own words. Slowly the sword went back. At length, feeling bemused, and breathing deeply, he summoned a page and commanded that the queen be sent for at once.

She came, lovely as ever, this time in a silver gown of eye-dazzling décolletage, her beautiful form most ravishingly displayed by the cunning of the dressmaker's heart.

"Yes my love, my lord?" she enquired in a honeyed voice, all the while sensible of the devouring gaze of the young Skimalis. At the sight of her pristine beauty, the king felt all his love for her well up within him; he trembled—a weird sensation to him—and spoke gently. He knew, then, that he could not do it!

"My love—it was nothing. It—that is, we—forgive me. Violetta, dearest heart, please leave us. I—I am confused."

With a little curtsey, and a discreet glance at Skimalis, she began to go.

Skimalis whispered urgently: "Without her, it cannot be done! I must be in the same room with her, and no one else, for twenty-four hours! Without the power that she can give, I cannot work with the large quantities you need!"

The king looked on the old, withered form, and muttered, anxiously, half to himself, "What harm can there be?"

Forthwith he recalled his queen, and he explained what was required of her.

She seemed aghast.

"That you—you!—my lord, who upholds with such vigour the sanctity of marriage, should consent to such a thing!" Very gracefully, she did a swoon on to a couch, in such a way that she could keep her eyes on the young Skimalis.

His majesty snorted.

"Why not? What harm can he do you? None!" he bent close to her, whispering urgently, suppressing his teeming emotions. "Have I ever before asked you to make any sacrifice, of any kind?" She began to speak of the gold lame gown, but he brushed that aside. "Violetta, this will be a secret, completely! It is for our country; he insists that only you can give the power. Do you think that I would permit this, if I thought that any harm could come of it? If that were so, the country could go to absolute ruin before I would allow it!"

He spoke the last words with great intensity, not being entirely sure that they were true. He looked down at her; her eyes were so beautiful, with such long lashes. He felt full of pride and admiration; she was so straight where she should be straight, so well rounded where such a shape was desirable.

She took a deep breath, and that was good to see, too.

"Very well, Ladislás. For you, and the country, I will do this."

And she turned away quickly, so that her lord should not see her blush under the ardent gaze of the young Skimalis—where Ladislás saw only the satisfied nodding of a harmless old man.

The king gave orders that one whole section of the castle, including the royal bedchamber, should be cleared, and that no one, on pain of instant death, was to enter. He kept his feelings under iron control, and quivered when the sorcerer asked that the royal bed should be freshly draped, and garlanded with flowers; but the thing was done.

The time came when Violetta, looking more ravishing than her uneasy husband ever remembered seeing her, entered the chamber with its great canopied bed on the high dais. Ladislás gave Skimalis a searching glance; yes, he was very old. Even so, he stayed the sorcerer at the door, his eyes burning with a feverish light.

"There will be much gold?"

"Much. The power of beauty and the power of sorcery are great."

"You—will not harm her?" His eyes searched the old face.

"I will use no magic with her, your Majesty."

The fears of Ladislav were soothed as he met the watery gaze of the other. He gave his queen a swift, fervent kiss, and walked from the room, down the corridor, and out of the forbidden section of the castle, locking the great doors behind him.

A duplicate key of the bedroom was in his pocket, and he tried not to think about it.

Throughout the day he busied himself, meeting ambassadors from other countries with confidence, thinking of the financial independence which he would soon enjoy. Some there were in the court who fingered their necks, and wondered what his almost frenetic joviality pretended. His announcement that the queen was away on important court business caused a buzz among the court ladies who resented what seemed to be yet another accomplishment of the queen; so now she was ambassadress!

While playing with his sons, his majesty's thoughts were elsewhere. His elder boys asked for their mother, and would scarcely be reassured by him. It was not long before Ladislav began to miss his queen so much that he left the royal nursery, and descended the not-well-lit stairway, where he met what he sought—a new serving wench of considerable charm. After this, he felt a little better, but not for long.

As night came he dismissed his servitors, and, with an oft-replenished mug of slivovitz to hand he walked his private apartments, thinking. And, while he thought, the fire of the slivovitz took hold of him.

This was for the country.

Of course.

She had acceded because she loved him, and for no other reason.

Certainly—with that old mumbler—what else? He was so old.

But—suppose Skimalis pawed her?

Well? Would she be any the worse for it?

He loved her.

The country needed gold.

The two irresistible forces met in the centre of his skull and ground together like armoured men in mortal combat.

Eventually he was impelled to leave his rooms, and to go and stand at the doors of the sealed section of the castle. Here, by the light from two high sconces, Ladislas stood in perplexed thought, his hand on the key of the twin doors and the key of that *other* door. He opened the twin doors slowly, and stood listening to the mouse-haunted silence of the darkness beyond. Then he took a sconce from its bracket, hesitated, replaced it, and shook his head. No, he knew the way ! He pinched his lips tightly, and strove to ignore the thudding of his heart. All he wanted to do was to approach the door softly, and listen, in case.

He walked down the corridor, one hand holding the scabbard of his sword for fear that it should clank, and the other hotly upon the key to the bedroom. A tiny scuttling form winked a red eye at him, and disappeared. Hammers beat in his head, and he could not tell why. He slowed as he approached the door, very quietly, and listened.

For a moment, he heard nothing at all ; then he made out a man's voice very soft.

" You did not know what he saw, then ?"

A *young* man's voice ! The red beard of the king began to bristle.

Violetta answered ; her voice was warm, plummy, content. The king knew the tone, and remembered the occasions when she was wont to use it.

" No. I only knew what *I* saw. Mmmmmmmmm." She sighed. " Oh, Skimalis, you are as ardent as you were at Ancona, six years ago." She laughed, and the listening monarch began to tremble. " Hello again, young Skimalis !"

When the sorcerer laughed the blood rose so swiftly with rage that it sang in the head of His Majesty, and his whole body shook. He had but one desire, to unlock the door, charge in, and unseam them both from the nape to the chaps. Violetta, *his* Violetta had deceived him ! But amid his anguish there sounded the voice of caution. Swords might not prevail against the cunning Skimalis, nor racks nor iron maidens.

What, then ?

By the side of the door, darkly swathed, stood the great mirror, tall as the king himself, which had been removed from the royal bedchamber. Remembering what Skimalis had said, the king unsheeted it, and stood it ready beside the door,

which he unlocked with quivering caution. Not the tiniest creak was heard. It swung wide, revealing the softly lit room, with the high dais crowned by the great bed. Now the fiery anger of the king was replaced by a cold desire for revenge. With the queen he would deal later, but for Skimalis, this was annihilation ! Holding the mirror glass side outwards, he crept forward, step by step, the fond noises of the couple tearing at his very soul. At a crouch, he ascended the five steps, the mirror still held in front of him.

They did not hear him.

When he spoke, it was in a hissing whisper.

" Look, Skimalis, look ! " he said.

Violetta gave a scream, and the other started up. For a tiny instant, Ladislav saw the *young man*, and then, with a moan, the sorcerer's body seemed to lose shape, and he slid horribly into the mirror like a viscous liquid poured from a jar.

A moment later, uttering a cry of indescribable sorrow, Violetta followed. The king had forgotten—that not only would Skimalis perish thus, but also those dear to him ; Violetta was now dear to him. He set down the mirror, and turned it round. Within he saw the terrible crawling shapes of Violetta and Skimalis, twisting grotesquely, screaming soundlessly, turning and leaping with a ghastly slowness, mouthing and writhing like the figures of the damned.

King Ladislav began to scream.

He was still screaming when the servitors rushed in to find him completely mad, and mad he was until the day of his death.

That same mirror remains ; it is said that, on occasion, those who have been unfaithful to their spouses can see in its glass the agonised shapes of the lovely Violetta and her evil lover.

I have told this story many times ; I told it to the visitors this afternoon.

Jovanka walked away, with that fine swing of hips, and into the royal apartment ; a moment later I heard a penetrating scream of utter terror, and she ran out, screaming still, and away down the corridor.

I could not catch her ; I cannot move fast enough ; I must phone her aunt in Brno—I expect that she *did* visit her aunt in Brno ?

You see, it is true that there was a King Ladislav III who went mad ; it is true that he had a beautiful queen named Violetta, who died suddenly. But, as for the Skimalis affair, it is a tale for tourists ; I made it up.

—John Kippax

Everyone could walk safely down the stairs except Alan Watkins. When he reached the seventh one he always disappeared—and where he went wasn't particularly pleasant!

THE SEVENTH STAIR

BY FRANK BRANDON

o n e

The call came just as I'd finished putting the car away and had crept in to the flat out of a night filthy with snow and slush and with temperatures near freezing. I'd taken off my overcoat, gloves, scarf, jacket and air of ill-humour, with the electric fires going full blast, the radio just warming up for the symphony concert from the Royal Festival Hall—my hand was on the cocktail cabinet door.

Then the phone rang and it was Watkins.

Now Alan Watkins is a fine chap, one of the best and all that; but he was babbling something about my coming round right away.

"Tonight?" I said, outraged. "Now?"

"Yes. Can you come right away, Phil?"

"But what the hell—look here, Alan, I've only just got in and you know what it's like out. What's up?"

For I had heard an odd, queer sort of choking gasp over the receiver.

"Nothing — nothing," Watkins said and there was a catch in his throat. "I can't explain—I've got to see you—either I'm going nuts or the whole world is coming to an end!"

"Well," I said unkindly. "the place for you is Mont Blanc or somewhere, camping out awaiting the crack of doom."

"Phil! You've got to come round! Now!"

"Now look here, Alan," I said in my firm and determined voice. "You just go to bed and sleep it off—"

He called me a variety of names, all highly diverting but, unfortunately, unprintable. "I must see you. It's a matter of life or death."

By this time I was more or less resigned.

"Can't you come round here?"

"No," he said. And something about his voice caught the breath in my throat. Alan Watkins, big and burly and tough and looking quite unlike the top-line mathematician he is, was afraid. Was scared silly. "No, Phil, I can't. I daren't go down the stairs."

Even then, even with that premonitory thrill, I was damned annoyed. It was one hell of a night. And the car heater was not working enough to melt an ice cream. "All right, Alan, you logarithmic calculus, you, I'll come."

I put the phone down quickly. I thought I'd heard Alan Watkins say: "Thank God!" And mean it.

And that was the man who had tried to show by mathematics that we're all mere freakish accidents in the galaxy.

The night drive was not as bad as I'd anticipated, partly because much of the traffic had cleared off the icy roads and I had the wide lamp-shining wastes to myself. And partly, too, I confess, to a tingling feeling of anticipation. Something was happening to Watkins, something very strange, and, being by nature a nosey so - and - so and by profession an extranophilist, I was intrigued.

An extranophilist? One who is a lover of strange facts and fancies. A profession? I collected these odd happenings and bizarre occurrences and wrote books, TV scripts—any-

thing that would communicate that oddity, that bizarre fact, to the palpitating minds of the great admass. It was past eleven when I pulled up outside Watkins' flat and rang the bell.

Nothing happened for a bit and I stamped my feet about to prevent them freezing to the pavement. Then, in the cold air, I heard a window open. I looked up and stepped back to get a better view.

Something crackled with a metallic ting on the icy porch.

A voice floated down, a hoarse, strained voice: "Let yourself in, Phil, there's a good chap."

Luckily I found the key without a deal of trouble and let myself in. Watkins' flat was a bachelor's delight, full of sporting prints and shooting trophies and tiger-skin rugs, provided by the unerring eye and deadly hand of Watkins himself. He kept a large and wonderfully stocked cellar and he opened the door for me with two glasses of whisky in his left hand. I took one, said: "Thanks, Alan, cheers." And then, shivering in the warmth, inside and out: "What the hell's up?"

He looked at me for a moment, strangely. I might not have recognised him, passing casually in the Strand; now I had to believe that this grey-faced, gaunt, shadowed-eyed creature really was Alan Watkins.

"Phil," he said; and there was agony and shame and a terrible fear in his voice. "I can't go down the stairs."

I said the first thing that came into my head.

"Well, use the confounded lift, then."

"We don't have a lift."

Watkins lived in a tall, narrow-faced old house in one of those secret squares lying between two main thoroughfares that have no right, it seems, to exist in the present century. London is honey-combed with them, lying behind Bloomsbury and Holborn and even the mushroom upsurge of concrete and glass has not yet—thankfully—obliterated them all. If you met Doctor Johnson rolling along the narrow pavement with the tall railings and the semibasement windows at his back, you wouldn't be the slightest surprised.

Watkins lived on the second floor. The stairs were confined, twisty, covered with a decent tufted carpet and the banisters were solid mahogany. There was always a decent smell of floor polish in the air.

"So you can't go down the stairs," I said. "So how do you manage about your work?"

He was a professor at the University and I knew that he was regarded as a very-very top man in his field. Maths, however, and I parted company as soon as school let out.

"I haven't been across for a week," he admitted.

"What! But—"

"I've told them I'm sick. The doc's been a couple of times and I've managed to fob him off. But he's suspicious. I've been waiting for you to get back, Phil—I felt I had to turn to you—"

I'd been in farthest Afghanistan, brushing up my Pushto with Pakhtun friends from before partition and being polite to both Pakistani and Afghan without appearing to be a chicken-heart to the Pakhtuns, who bow down to no one.

Watkins and I had been in Intelligence together, on the staff of the same division. But I was surprised he felt so strongly about whatever was amiss that he had waited for me. I looked about the room, at the leather armchairs, the book-cases, the pots on the mantleshef over the electric fire and at the locked cupboard where he kept his artillery.

The cupboard was unlocked, the door swinging open. I caught a glimpse of ranked sporting rifles, elephant guns, shotguns. But most of the weapons lay on an oval table, under the window, with cardboard boxes of shell at hand, and the leather armchairs had been drawn up to form a sort of stockade, facing the door.

"You have got it bad," I said. I tried to jolly him along. "D.T.'s?"

He didn't smile. "I don't know whether or not to say I wish it was," he said.

I thought the joke had gone far enough. I helped myself to another whisky, pulled, against his instinctive protestation, an armchair around to the fire, sat down and put my feet up on an ottoman. "Tell me."

He began uneasily. We'd been on safari together in the old days, and I remembered his trick of lifting his head to obtain a clear sight of the quarry. But I'd never known him so nervy, so jumpy, so sheerly washed-out as now.

"It began a week—no eight days—ago. I started out as usual in the morning. I'd been working late on a theorem so wild that I won't bore you with it, and I was in a hurry. Well, I opened the door, took my usual six strides across

the landing—I've counted them, since, I can tell you. My whole Empire—six strides across a landing."

"And—?"

"And I went down four steps. On the fifth I felt hot, and on the sixth I smelt a rotting jungle smell that we—well, you remember. On the seventh I wasn't going down a staircase in London at all. I was going down a steep grass covered slope with a jungle and swamp spread out before me, under a blazing sun, and with the most infernal noise bellowing up out of it."

He put a hand to his face. His fingers shook.

"I bolted back so fast I fell full length on the stairs. I tried it again, thinking I'd been dreaming. But the damn jungle and the heat and the noise and the smell of rotting vegetation was still there. I came back here. Since then I've tried to get down, on and off, four or five times a day. No luck."

"And the artillery?"

"Once a blasted great bird thing swooped on me and took off my hat. And a thing like a Centurion lumbered out of the jungle and started up the slope. I fell down and nearly went crazy trying to find my stairs again—"

"Trying to find—how's that?"

"I thought I'd explore this—this other place. I was pretty well tight at the time. I took down an umbrella and stuck it in the grass. Then I could find my way back. But I got twisted around and chased by what I can only describe as a Tyrannosaurus—"

"So you think you've been back in time to the Jurassic or the Mesozoic, or whatever oics that time was called."

"I don't know, Phil. I just don't know. I had the strongest conviction that I was no longer on Earth—"

"Earth as we know it now."

"No. No, not on Earth at all."

"Venus?"

"Isn't the latest theory that the place is a dusty bowl? Or is that the one before. They keep changing."

"They don't know, Alan," I said sharply. "Anything else?"

"But—Oh God, God! Do you believe me?"

"I've never yet known you lie. Except to that M.P. when we'd stashed the girls in the jeep—but that was different."

Watkins sat in the chair and put his head down. His hands clasped over the back of his neck. I let him stay that way awhile, hoping that he'd pull through without any more guff. And by guff I meant just that—I thought he had been going through a severe emotional strain and once I could find out what had been causing that, the rest would be plain sailing.

It wouldn't be drink. He'd said he'd been tight going down the stairs and that had surprised me. We were a pretty harum-scarum lot, the crowd Watkins and I had mixed with, but drunkenness had been markedly absent. You tended to get killed if you were blotto on a job.

After a few minutes I stood up and opened the door. Yes, just six strides for a six-foot one and a half inch man to cross the landing. One step down. Two. Three. Four—was it hotter? I felt sweat start on my forehead and cursed myself for a credulous fool. Five. Six. Nothing. Just tufted carpet, mahogany banister and porridgey-coloured wall-paper. I went to the landing to make sure and turned, running back up four at a time. Thankfully, too, I might add.

"It doesn't work for me, Alan."

"No. It doesn't work for anyone else. The doc's okay, and so is the waiter from the Italian restaurant who brings my food up. Only me, Phil. Only me. Why?"

"Because you've a gifted imagination and have been over-doing things," I said with cheerfulness. "Now. Hold my arm. We'll go down together."

"No! No. Phil, I couldn't."

"But you've been down exploring the jungle," I said, reasonably but foolishly. "Where's the danger—?"

"I took my umbrella down and stuck it in the ground," he said stubbornly. "Can you see it, down the stairs?"

I shook my head. "No." I said. Perhaps he'd dropped the brolly over the banisters and the landlady had tidied it away. I'd have to ask her.

But already I was having the nasty feeling that she'd know nothing of any umbrella. I was beginning to think that it was stuck in the grass of a knoll in some remote jungle, not of this Earth—and then I pulled my chaotic thoughts together. Alan Watkins was having a brainstorm. It was my duty to see him through.

"When is the doc coming again?"

"Tomorrow. Ten-thirty."

"I'll be here. Now—are we going down together?"

Watkins was no coward. We'd been through some scrapes together and I knew that all right. But I guessed that this thing I was so casually asking him to do—he'd stopped going down the stairs at all recently—was the biggest test of his life. But he tried to give me a smile and the old thumbs up sign and then he gripped my arm—tight.

Together, we went out the door. A single lamp was burning on the landing and the stairs were in darkness, a growing darkness the further you went, until the lower landing and its single bulb brought once again the relief of light into the world. I hadn't noticed that, on my earlier trip down.

We went down the stairs. Watkins gripped my arm with a devilishly tight grasp; but I said nothing. One. Two. He began to tremble. Three. On four again I thought I felt an oven breath but the tufted carpet was still solid beneath my feet. The fifth—and the heat must be there. On the sixth now—was there a foetid odour of untamed jungle?

An then, on the seventh step, I felt a difference in the grip on my arm. Watkins was still holding to me; but it was the grip of a weakening sailor, drowning on his raft in mid-Atlantic. Instinctively I reached across and took his arm.

"Nothing yet," I said reassuringly.

He did not answer. And I had the shocking conviction that he was no longer with me. A strange phenomenon. A similar feeling you have talking to persons whose eyes suddenly lose focus, and who gaze into the far distance—and you know they are not conscious of their surroundings, or you, any longer. Only, this feeling was a hundred times stronger. I was holding Alan Watkins' arm and he was gripping me—yet he wasn't there with me on the stair any more.

Then he began to thrash about, kicking and struggling.

I backtracked fast, and I had to haul him up the stairs after me. He was a dead weight. We could not have been down below the danger mark—the fifth step—for more than a minute. But when we reached the top again Watkins was insensible.

And in his hand was an umbrella.

I stared at the thing. Neatly rolled, black, with yellow mud smears glistening along the folds.

Then I believed.

two

I just didn't give credence to the thought that he'd picked up the brolly from the stairs, hidden in some dark angle of banister and riser. He was still unconscious and his face with a three-day stubble looked like the face of a dead soldier, decomposing in a shell-hole.

I put him into an armchair and poured two drinks, one for my nerves and one for my digestion. I stared at Watkins. His suit, which had been in bad shape, creased, stained, the trousers baggy and with traces of that same yellow mud on the knees, was now in a worse condition than ever. There was a long jagged rip in the jacket I hadn't noticed before. The pocket hung slashed open.

And yet—could I believe? Yellow mud on an umbrella, a wild story, a grey-faced shadow-haunted man in place of a rough and tough comrade—were these things enough to convince me that, along with Watkins, either I was going insane or the world was coming to an end?

When Watkins came around I spent some time making sure he was fully recovered and then he told me what had happened.

On the fourth and fifth — heat. Sixth — smell. On the seventh—he said: "Then you just disappeared, Phil. I went on down the slope into the jungle, alone."

"But I was holding your arm all the time," I protested.

"I could feel that pressure. Strangely enough, that was the most bizarre touch of all. Walking in my jungle—I've come to accept that—but walking with the clasp of an unseen man strong on my arm, well, Phil—"

"Then what?"

He made a vague gesture. "I felt myself to be trapped with this hold on me, preventing me from running back—or of pressing on. Something reared up out of the grass and struck at me. I caught a glimpse only of emerald green eyes and a skin patterned like marble. The thing missed me, luckily, I swung away—"

"Which way?" I said harshly. I remembered his floundering.

"Oh—right, I think."

I pointed to his jacket pocket and the great gash there.

"Whew!" Watkins said. "The blighter was closer than I thought."

Now—now I had to believe. The umbrella had convinced me. Then I had rationalised that. Now this jagged gash in his jacket. But he could have done that himself, in the darkness of the stairway. This was a hell of a mess.

There was, of course, only one way to test this thing finally, once and for all.

"Alan," I said, slowly, "would you go down those stairs again, alone?" As he began an automatic protest I hurried on: "Only so far as it takes you to enter this other world. I could feel your grip on my arm and feel myself holding you. But if I disappeared to you—then you ought to vanish to me."

He nodded. "I don't relish the thought. But, after all, it is my jungle, made by my equations. All right, Phil." He nodded with the briskness of a man opening his mouth to the dentist's drill. "I'll vanish all right."

I shone the torch down the stairs. Alan Watkins walked steadily down—this time holding a shot gun at the ready—and he vanished.

I blinked. He wasn't there. That little rhyme came back and I wanted—insanely—to giggle, there standing at the head of the stairs shining a torch beam down and through where a second before a living man had stood. I went down a couple of steps and Watkins nearly knocked me over rushing back.

"Here," he panted. "Grab this."

Automatically, I grabbed. Then revulsion flowed over me. The thing was a lizard—a lizard a good two feet long, still thrashing about from the tail I gripped in my fist, although most of its right foreleg and chest had been shot away.

"Hell, Alan!" I shouted. "Take the beastly thing."

"You didn't believe me," he answered in a vicious shout. "All right. Just wait a minute." And again, he vanished.

When Alan Watkins flew into a paddy—it was best to stand clear. I'd doubted his word—so he was proving his point. I went back to the lounge, put the lizard down carefully—the poor thing was almost dead—and decided against another drink. This added another number to the little list I intended phoning as soon as the sun was up.

My extranophile enquiries had taken a twist; now I was more interested in accurately tagging this strange place that Watkins visited. He'd said he felt it to be not of this Earth. Maybe the surroundings were so strange that that impression would be the automatic response; I still believed he was in

some way slipping through a rent in the time stream and was taking saunters through dinosaur-land. The lizard would help to put a date and time—within a million years or so—to that theory.

The first words I said to Watkins when he panted in, carrying his shotgun and another unsavoury-looking lizard, were: "And what equations are they that create other worlds?"

He looked uncomfortable and flung the second lizard to lie with its cousin. He crossed to the cabinet and poured a drink. I noticed that he kept the shotgun with him.

"If I tell you that, Phil," he said at last, evidently taking my acceptance of the story as read, "the consequences may be unpleasant. For you, that is."

"How?"

He sat down and propped the shotgun against the armchair.

"Einstein is at the moment undergoing some pretty intensive testing. We now have means whereby we can put his theories to the proof. And I don't just mean mathematically. You've heard of the Doppler Effect, of course—the rising and falling note of an express whistle, for instance. Well, they've now been able experimentally to observe what is called the Transverse Doppler Effect. They do it by using the resonance technique with iron isotope fifty-seven and gamma rays." He saw my expression and went on: "What it amounts to is that time is dilated in a fast-moving system."

He stood up and prowled about, forgetting the gun and his drink, lost in expounding his fanciful theories. But they were not, as he explained, fanciful any more.

"I put together a series of equations and suddenly found I'd stumbled upon a new technique, that I suppose must have a parallel in—forgive me—the ancient incantations for conjurations. By studying the maths your mind is able to conjure the desired object—"

"But you didn't want to let yourself walk through into a jungle world, Alan!"

"No. That must have been a sideband effect. All I know is that those damned equations are at the root of it all."

"Where are they now?"

"In my safe, locked up."

"May I see them?"

"No!" He fairly shouted it. "Of course not! Do you want to enter another world every time you descend the stairs?"

He had a point, at that.

In the end we decided that I should stay the night—his flat possessed a neat little guest-room—and I admit I was glad not to have to drive back. The car would be all right in this little-used byway of London. In the morning I'd see the doctor and contact the numbers on my list. Sleep came up fast—I was devilishly tired; but the dreams which followed concerned men who weren't upon stairs, and flashes of grim butchery among Pakhtuns, with giant pterodactyls flying overhead and Brontosaur and Diplodocus thrashing below. I did not, naturally, sleep well.

Alan Watkins, I believe, didn't sleep at all.

The doctor turned out to be small, perky and very cheerful. He puttered about his Aescupian labours and then said: "Physically, Alan, you're a hundred per cent except for extreme fatigue and nervous debility. I'm prescribing pills to keep you alive. But—"

He went on. I don't believe he was exaggerating.

He finished by saying: "Why don't you get away for a week or two? Do some shooting somewhere. Get some fresh air into your lungs."

Both Watkins and I laughed. The doc looked from one to the other and his little mouth tightened up.

"Sorry, doctor," I apologised, meaning it. "That's a good idea."

When he had gone Alan Watkins started to tear up the prescription. I took it away from him. "You'll need that."

Most of my telephoned contacts were helpful.

Tony Ufton, who had been the divisional maintenance officer was rather tickled. "With all bells ringing and lights flashing?" he asked in that catchy voice of his.

"You have to practice, don't you, Tony?" I asked.

"Of course, old boy. Be delighted. Middle of the afternoon. Mustn't give the chaps any warning, you know."

"Right. I'm much obliged. I'll explain more when we see you."

"What's all that about?" asked Watkins.

"Seeing a man about a fire," I said shortly, and dialled.

Stephen Marmaduke Searles had been the staff cipher officer, and a very smart one at that. "You don't say," he said when I'd finished. "Can you bring it round?"

"Later this evening, Steve. I suppose it'll keep?"

"Sure to, for that short time. But don't hang about."

"Now what?" grumbled Watkins.

I chuckled. "Seeing a man about a corpse," I said, unkindly.

The Italian waiter brought lunch and we both made a good meal, spaghetti Bolognais and a bottle of wine. Then Watkins disappeared. After a few moments I smelt burning.

I rushed into the toilet, smashing the lock; but I was too late.

"All gone," Watkins said with evil satisfaction. "All burnt to a cinder." Then he flushed the ashes away.

"You idiot!" I said heatedly. "Those equations were the answer to all this—you—you—"

Watkins laughed. It was a hollow, weak, ghoulisn laugh. But he sounded relieved and more human than at any time since I'd met him after he'd rung.

"I should have done that long ago. Got rid of them. Now no one else can go down into that—that—hell."

I said, as cuttingly as I could: "And can you?"

An expression of joy rushed across his face. He seized a gun and dived for the door. I watched him clatter down the stairs and I knew that he was hoping against hope that he would reach the bottom landing.

But he disappeared.

He came back, forlorn, wretched, angry.

"Still the same damn jungle." Then he stopped stock still. His head went up in that characteristic gesture. He turned around, thrust the gun forward, and jumped down the stairs again.

He hadn't returned when I heard the bells in the street.

Tony Ufton would be slightly put out.

There was an uproar at the door below. Then a lorry engine revved, high and whining. I went back into the flat in time to stop them smashing the window in.

A very large and very formidable fireman, in black helmet, fire-axe at the ready, crouched on the ladder outside.

"Where is he?" he demanded. "Smoke case, isn't he?"

"Yes," I said weakly. Then, because once the fire brigade was in action they demanded a sacrifice, was about to say: "Me." I was saved by the door and Watkins walking in, tired, whey-faced, dragging his feet which left long smears of yellow mud.

"I forgot to put the umbrella back," he said. "I couldn't find my damned way back."

"Never mind, Alan," I said rapidly. "Just let things happen." Then, to the fireman: "There he is. Treat him gently."

Alan Watkins was seized, hoisted with a brawny arm between his legs, run out the window and down the fire escape before he knew what had hit him. I picked up the gun from the carpet and looked out the window.

He was on the turntable arguing with Tony Ufton, who looked incredibly smart in his fire chief's rig.

I waved and shouted: "Hold on, I'm coming down."

I closed the window—it was very cold—put the gun down and went down the stairs. Again that brief sensation of heat and then I was through, out into the street, shivering.

"What the hell's going on?" demanded Watkins wrathfully.

"You're down, aren't you, Alan?" I asked.

That shut him up.

"Five minutes dead," Ufton said with a glance at his watch. "What held you up there?"

"The smoke case was temporarily absent," I said. "Come on. Thanks, Tony. You did a good job. I'll see you later on and fill you in."

"Well—" he said, and pushed his uniform cap back.

Although I didn't realise it then, I'd been an incredible fool. A gullible fool. I thought that by getting Watkins down safely and through the strata where he entered his jungle, I'd proved the entry existed on the stairs. That was a perfectly reasonable idea, too.

But there was no time now to spend explaining it all to Ufton. On impulse, I said: "Why don't you wander round tonight to my place, Tony? I'll get some beer in."

"Right. I'd love to. And you owe me an explanation." With that he was off, rounding up his men like a sheep dog at trials. I bundled Watkins into my car. He was shivering with cold.

"That damned jungle's hot, Phil," he complained. "And you have me dragged out into the winter—"

"Stop belly-aching," I said, starting the car. "I'm running you over to my place. Then I'll fetch a few things for you and we can discuss the whole mess tonight. Some of the other boys might like to come, too."

"You mean to get the Div staff in on it?"

I laughed. "I hadn't thought—but it might not be a bad idea, at that."

three

I decanted Watkins, gave him my key and a threat not to stir, and went back to his flat. Right in the middle of pulling out the things he had asked for, the phone rang.

Something inside me flopped over. Before I'd lifted the receiver and heard Watkins' voice, I knew.

"Phil," he said, and there was a resigned agony in his voice. "I can't get down your stairs, either."

"Well," I said, trying to force it, to be cheerful, "Well. We have a lift."

He put the receiver down without answering. So I packed the artillery as well.

The two lizards I put into big polyfilm bags. They still looked sound and didn't smell more than a moderately choked sewer, so I figured they'd keep for Steve Searles. The Museum was much closer to Watkins' place, where I now was, than to mine, so, feeling that Watkins wouldn't do anything stupid whilst I was away, I went around, avoiding the main pillared entrance. Searles met me wearing his stained white lab smock, plaster on his hands and a piece of bone a hundred million years old in his fingers.

He went into some sort of daze when he saw the lizards.

"I don't believe this," he said, over and over. He raked out books, illustrations, neatly drawn diagrams of skeletons. "I'll have to dissect, of course, but . . ."

"But remember our old friend the *Coelacanth*," I said, helpfully.

He brightened. "Yes. But you — me — !"

"I'm having a small get-together tonight at my place. I particularly want you to come."

"But I'll be busy with these—"

"Do what you can; but come. It's got a lot to do with them. Alan Watkins is in trouble—"

"Not Alan?"

"Bring some kit and tools, whatever it is you use, with you tonight. You might have—have more work to do."

His frenzy grew then against my refusal to say any more and I left him muttering dire threats about murder, and hanging, drawing and quartering. "And I can do the neatest job on quartering," he said, darkly.

Driving back to my flat I tried to envisage what might happen. The biggest problem was in preventing what had happened to Watkins preying on his mind to such an extent that he might lose his sanity. We were, as I've said, a pretty harum-scarum bunch, the old armoured Div staff; but you might almost say by virtue of our survival that we were well-balanced when it came to the things that mattered. I knew Watkins and I faced amused disbelief; but we could soon show that the things happening to Watkins were true.

After that we must figure out a way of cancelling the effect, of somehow stopping those devilish equations from catapulting a man through into another world—or another time.

Really, it didn't matter where or which it was. The fact now staring me in the face was that I had to save old Watkins. After that, then would be the time to find out all we could about the place. I was looking forward to that.

Watkins opened at my ring. He looked miserable, shrunken, resigned.

He helped me in with the gear, placing the guns about in handy positions.

I'd wondered at his zariba at his own place, and when I saw that he'd done the same thing in my own flat, dragging chairs and cupboards around to form a barricade, I felt a tingle of apprehension.

He saw my look.

"Yes, Phil. We don't know what we're meddling with. So I go through into another world—the seventh step, incidentally. But how do I know that something won't come back out of that world?"

"Hunh?" I said. Then: "But, hell's bells, man! You can't have primeval monsters running about all over London!"

"No? I'm a twentieth century Earthman running about all over that other place, am I not?"

I thought. "But then, Alan, those beasties haven't read your equations."

"No," he said. "No, they haven't. Thank God."

Steve Searles rang up, pretty incoherently, to tell us that the lizards we had dumped on him should have died about a hundred and seventy or so million years ago, near the beginning of the Age of Reptiles, the Mesozoic Era. They were very early types, precursors, even, of the thecodonts who ran on their hind legs. Watkins' lizards ran on all fours.

Watkins interrupted to say that he'd seen a thing bigger than a Sherman and faster than a Honey and how did that fit?

I didn't repeat this to Searles, because he was saying, with the perplexed impatience of the scientist temporarily baffled: "The only really odd thing about them, apart from their very existence, was that they were turned about. They had their hearts over on the right, and similar funny arrangements. They were mirror-images of what I'd expected."

Mirror-images.

I told Watkins and he found a scratch pad and began doodling, using the cabalistic language of the mathematician.

"Don't be late tonight, Steve," I said, and rang off.

"Not Earth," I said to Watkins. "Seems you were right."

My next call was to Jock McTaggart. He'd been the Div's signals officer. I told him about the party. "And can you bring some of that two-way walkie-talkie stuff you've lying about?"

He started to ask questions.

"No questions, Jock." I told him what I wanted.

He promised to bring it, mystified.

I think the clincher was the mention of whisky.

Watkins was still sitting in the chair, a shotgun and an elephant gun handy, figuring. I made some tea. It seemed to me dangerous to leave Watkins alone, and I chafed to be out and about the next task. That promised to be a problem.

Ringling Taffy Llewellyn gave no hope.

"Sorry, Phil. That sort of stuff is dead difficult now. Now during the Korean biz, or right after Suez—"

"Know anyone who can?"

He gave me a name and address and a few more telephone calls, plus a lot of quick talking, put me on to a certain Charles Hawtrey. At least, that was the name he was using. I vaguely remembered him—one of the boffins from R.E.M.E. and a little out of my sphere.

"I'll do all I can to help, Phil," he said doubtfully. "Ring you back."

"Okay." I hung up. Well, it was a chance.

Then I tried to contact some more of the boys who were living handily in London. Not many; a lot had emigrated, retired to the country, were abroad on travels. But I collected four more and then it was dark and Steve Searles was ringing the door bell and panting in under a load of equipment.

Only then did I realise that there was no food in the flat and the beer hadn't been laid on. I said to Watkins: "Steve wants another specimen. If you just bowl down and grab him one, that'll save a lot of disbelief."

Searles just gaped. He gaped a sight harder when, wearily, Watkins picked up the elephant gun and went down the stairs—my stairs—and vanished.

He returned with another lizard, a different sort from the first two. He looked tired and ill and the blacks under his eyes made me realise just how hard I had been pushing him.

Searles was raving; but I quietened him sharply, told him to listen to Watkins whilst I went out. Tony Ufton arrived, thought we were pulling his leg; but agreed to stay and listen.

"When everyone else is here, then, and only then, does Alan go down again," I said. Watkins gave me a weak smile.

"But—" said Ufton.

"No buts. If everyone is here before I get back, then let Alan decide. But for Pete's sake, take it easy."

Buying the drink was easy enough and I took Ufton along to drag it back to the flat. Then I set off.

Charles Hawtrey turned out to be a very decent chap, quite different from what I had expected. "Damned difficult stuff," he said. "But the lorry's waiting in North London. We'd better go up together. Chap was doing a deal with—well, you needn't know about that—and when he heard who it was for, pushed it our way at once, without a murmur. Odd."

When we reached the dark and greasy brick warehouse and drove into the dimly lit interior and a man walked towards us, a flash in one hand and the other in his pocket, the mystery, to me at any rate, was solved.

"Punchy!" I exclaimed. "I thought you were in the Middle East—Jordan way."

"Hi, Phil," he said calmly. "I was. But stores have to be replenished, you know."

"Well I'll be damned," I said. "If I'd known you were in town I'd have asked you first—"

Hawtrey laughed and said: "But I still get my cut, this way, eh?"

"Sure." I said. "But I think you'll get an agent's commission. I don't figure I'll need to buy this stuff now. Only borrow it."

"Now wait a minute—"

"What's up, Phil?"

"Alan Watkins is in trouble—"

"Not Alan!"

The same as they all said. I explained as little as possible. Punchy Draycott was the divisional scrounger, the officer who fixed the best billets, best messing and best of anything else you wanted. Now he was still doing his best to fix up needy people, all over the world. We got into the cab of his lorry when I'd said to Punchy: "Is it pukka stuff?" and he'd said: "Top line." Hawtrey drove his own car back and we followed in the lorry, picking up my car at Hawtrey's where I'd left it.

"You know my address, Punchy. Take all this gear there. There's a party. The boys will help you up the stairs. And then they'll fill you in about those stairs."

"Huh?"

"Free beer, Punchy. Don't ask questions."

I gave Hawtrey a cheque, which just about demolished my bank account, got into my car and drove back to Alan Watkins' flat.

The first thing I did inside was to ring my own number. Stan Shaw answered. He'd been the Div anti-aircraft officer.

"Put Alan on, will you, Stan?"

Watkins sounded run into the ground.

"Only Steve believes, because he saw me go down. And I'm damned well not going down again. That's flat."

"Listen, Alan, that's what I wanted to ask you about. When you went back because you'd just burned the equations and we thought there might be a chance that you wouldn't be able to any more, remember? Well—when you came back you were grabbed and run down the ladder. I didn't ask you. Why did you come back and then, very suddenly, turn around and rush down the stairs again?"

"Oh, that," he said. He was very exhausted, I could hear the rasp of his breathing over the phone. "I thought I'd heard a voice calling from the jungle. Impossible. So I came back. But only when I walked back into the room did I remember what the voice had sounded like, had been saying."

"And?"

"I thought the voice was human, and it was calling for help. Desperately."

"But you found nothing when you returned?"

"Not a thing. Then I had a hell of a job getting back because the umbrella wasn't there. I walked all around that damned grassy knoll, with the beasties flapping and crawling about. I thought I'd never get back."

"All right, Alan. Thanks. I'll be with you in about half an hour."

"But I'm not going down again."

I rang off without answering. If Watkins didn't go down again the other boys wouldn't believe. They'd crucify us.

I began collecting the rest of Watkins' artillery, all the guns he had. On my last trip down to the car, I stopped for a look around. The brown room was quiet and comfortable, the luxurious and manly room of the confirmed bachelor. Some of the boys had had to explain to their wives. I made a mental note that the married ones would have to be handled differently from the bachelors. This wasn't an affair for women.

Then I remembered, was appalled and made a drunken run across to the phone again. I made a hash of the dialling and had to press the bar and start over. This was going to be a lulu.

She wasn't amused. "You promised to ring as soon as you got back from wherever it was you've been. You didn't. Is this usual for you? Do you treat all your women like this? Or am I special?"

"Of course you're special, Kathryn; but, well, things came up—"

After we'd been wrangling for five minutes the idiocy of this struck me. What the hell! She was only a woman friend and had no hold over me. And I wasn't going to explain about Watkins and his equations and the other world to which they led. I kept it on a friendly level, promised to ring to-morrow, and put the receiver down. She'd given me a number I could reach her if she wasn't home. Knowing her, she wouldn't be.

Thinking that I'd better jot it down I reached for Watkins' scratch pad and my hand, clumsily, knocked it off the phone table into the waste-paper basket. Watkins put his typing there, and he'd evidently been working overtime, the basket was full of angrily crumpled sheets.

I fished the pad out and wrote Kathryn's number down.

Then, very carefully, slowly, not really believing, I reached down, took the top sheet and smoothed it out.

They were there all right. The neatly typed beginnings of equations. Watkins used a special typewriter filled with queer characters; and the times I'd kidded him over that one. Now I went through the papers in the basket, searching for a sheet that contained all the equations. He'd tried a lot, that boy. His typing was of the two fingers variety, and the mistakes were pitiful. Each time he made a typo he ripped the sheet out with a suitable exclamation and started over.

I couldn't find a single sheet with the complete equations.

It was most frustrating. About to give up in disgust, I pulled the carbon paper out of the bottom. Just a series of messy black sheets. Watkins was fussy about carbon, only using a sheet a few times. The last sheet of carbon, the one he'd dropped down on the desk after at last, triumphantly, finishing the equations without a single mistake, was lying neatly in the carbon folder on the desk. It had been there all the time.

I picked it up gingerly by one corner, held it up to the light, and peeked—fast.

There seemed to be just the one set of characters imprinted there, shining silver and soft amid the carbon black. Two clean sheets for a wrapper and the carbon was folded and placed away in my wallet. So much for Alan Watkins and his trick of burning and flushing away the equations.

four

The time had been slipping by and it was pretty late when I turned into my road. The pub on the corner was turning out and people were laughing and talking loudly, making their way to the bus stops and the Underground on the opposite corner. I waited for a rowdy party to cross and then drove on, over crunchy snow from the last fall, and pulled up outside my door.

From the noise racketting from my windows, all of which showed lights, the pub wasn't the only drinking party around here. I winced, thinking of the other tenants and the landlord.

They were a flushed and uproarious crew when I got upstairs. The thing that had excited them was not the drink but the story Watkins and Searles had told. Their happy,

cheery faces and loud voices, their extravagant gestures and speech, made any talk of going through into another world via a set of equations just so much nonsense. The real world personified by them simply brushed aside all such fancies.

As Tony Ufton said, glass in hand: "We'll drink your beer all night, Phil, and pay by listening to tall stories."

"Lizards," jeered Taffy Llewellyn, who'd turned up, anyway, scenting a party. "Phil brought the thing back from Tibet or wherever he's been."

Steve Searles had been working on the lizard. He told me in a quiet voice, hard to hear over the din, that this was another specimen straight from a time a hundred million years ago. "If only I could go through with Alan!" he said, aglow.

"You will," I said grimly. "Along with all of us."

"But why?" Alan Watkins said, joining us. He was looking a little more robust, I thought, and I guessed that came from his decision not to return to the land beyond the stairs. "Anyway, you can't get through without the equations. And I burnt those and flushed them away."

I didn't say anything then about the carbon paper. The stores that Punchy Draycott had unloaded from his lorry were standing crated along the wall. The others eyed them with aroused professional interest. The heavy wooden cases with their rope handles were nostalgically familiar.

"What's all the armament for?" asked Jock McTaggart.

"I'll tell you in a minute, Jock," I said. "Now listen you fellows, I've got something to tell you."

They crowded round. They exuded good fellowship, gaiety, the happy desire to have a good time. They beamed.

"I saw a man upon a stair," sang out Tony Ufton.

Lifting their glasses, they went on: "But when I looked he wasn't there."

They were stamping their feet in time, now.

"He wasn't there again today—I wish that man would go away!"

But the last line was spoiled by their different renditions.

"All right, you idiots," I said, hands on hips. Truth to tell, I was feeling the idiot. Only the sight of the set faces of Watkins and Searles gave me the courage to go on, the reassurance that it was I, and not this frabious crew, who was right.

"Listen, you fatheads!" I yelled over the row. "I'm going to prove it to you—and then we'll see." I stared at them all, one after the other. Then, hitting below the belt, very seriously, I said: "Are you standing there and telling me that you think Alan and Steve and I are a bunch of liars?"

That quietened them. It upset them.

"Now, look here, Phil—!"

"I say, old man!"

"Of course you're not—but—!"

"Very well," I said. "We'll put this to the test. For afterwards we have to do something about someone in trouble—someone apart from Alan." I looked about, ready to try to use all my rotten persuasive technique on Watkins and pressure him into going, once again, down the stairs.

But Watkins had vanished.

"Tally-ho!" they shouted, rushing about my flat. But Watkins was not to be found. Then I noticed that the big elephant gun I'd carried up with me and stuck behind the door with its bag of shells was also missing. I rushed out on to the landing, the pack at my heels. The indicator light above the lift was just sinking to the ground floor.

"After him!" I shouted.

They chorused Tally ho! and clattered down the stairs, hallooing, kicking up an infernal din. It was all a stupendous lark, a priceless joke, a gorgeous gag. The best night on the tiles they'd had in years.

I raced down the stairs, guessing what Alan Watkins was doing—or what he thought he was doing.

The night struck chill. The snow still shone white and glistening save where pedestrians and traffic had cut it into gluey brown streaks. Our breaths steamed out like a British Railways' shunting yard.

Watkins' footprints were plain. By the ferocious kick-up of snow and the length of stride between each print, he had been running hard. We chased after them like wolves on the trail.

"There he is!" someone yelled.

Alan Watkins was racing along the street about fifty yards away, head down, the elephant gun in one hand—he must have snatched it up automatically after his experiences, I suppose—the other claspings his jacket tight about him. Our footfalls were deadened underfoot. But he heard the yell and

turned his head, saw us, and sprinted harder than ever. No one thought to jump into one of the gaggle of cars parked at the kerb; maybe all the keys were in overcoat pockets, maybe we realised they wouldn't be much use. We chased along the ghostly pavement under the street lamps.

Alan Watkins was not running blind. I could guess the way his thoughts were going; anything would be better than to be continually forced to go down the stairs into his own equation-created jungle world. So he was running away.

For one, I couldn't blame him.

But, for the sake of saving his sanity permanently, he had to be brought back and worked on. We couldn't set about winning the struggle against whatever forces had him in their grip if he'd run out on us. So I thought, then.

Ahead the round lighted sign of the Underground showed up and Watkins must have seen this as a sign of salvation. If he could board a train and watch the doors slam in our face, he'd be safe for the night. He might even have missed the last train.

But we were gaining on him. Encumbered by the elephant gun, which he was probably too bemused to throw down, he was no match for the rollicking athletes following his spoor. We saw him for a moment, outlined against the light of the Underground welling up, and then he had started on down. The howling pack, completely disregarding the few late passers-by, raced to the top and started on down after Watkins. I was about fourth or fifth man. We were pouring over the top of the stairs, staggered one above the other and all glaring down on Watkins below.

And the inevitable happened.

He must have struggled to get back. He must have fought to keep his flailing feet and arms from carrying him on and forward and down—and down whatever part of the jungle this Underground stairway led. If it was still jungle. There might have been anything at all at the other side of the stairs.

Everyone tried to stop running. The pile up was fantastic. Taffy Llewellyn's feet slipped and he skidded down, bottoms up. Jock McTaggart's elbow thumped me in the ribs and Tony Ufton's hat—which, impeccably, he was wearing—flew off and rolled down into slushy snow trapped in the corner. He swore about his hat.

No one had much to say about Alan Watkins.

The pile of groaning bodies sorted itself out. Feet were angrily pulled off faces, and snow brushed out of hair. We milled about a little, half-expecting to see Watkins re-appear from a dark corner, laughing at us.

All, that is, except the two who had seen him vanish before.

Then, after some had prowled around all the dark corners of the Underground station without any trace, we wended slowly back to my flat. There wasn't much else we could do.

I had their attention now. I was angry, abysmally angry and ashamed. Poor old Alan! I'd driven him out and he'd run slap into the very horror he'd been trying to avoid.

"Right, you chaps," I said. "This is the drill." And I told them, fully, the story as it had happened. "And none of you can now say that it isn't so. You've seen for yourselves." They had to believe now; but they didn't want to. "So we've got to go through ourselves and rescue Alan, and also, if we can, find out what that human voice shouting for help was all about."

We discussed the affair inside out and backwards. But it all boiled down to the same thing in the end. I said: "We'll take a pretty conspicuous marker and plant it as soon as we hit the other side. The weaponry kindly provided—on loan—by Punchy will be shared out. We'd better also take water and rations—Tony bought those earlier, thinking we were just getting in fodder for the party."

"I did think you were buying a lot of solid stuff," Ufton remarked, still brushing his hat.

"There are a couple of bazookas, a satchel of grenades each and a Sterling or a Tommy-gun. The elephant guns will be useful—I'm thinking that the Sterlings will be of use only for small stuff. The bazookas will be the central fire power."

"Real anti-panzer stuff, eh?" Stan Shaw said.

"Only panzers that don't know they're dead when they are." Searles said gravely. "Two brains—measurable times for messages to reach limbs from brain, fifteen tons dead-weight. We're in for a rough time if—"

"And Alan's already in there," I said sharply. "He didn't come out at once and that means he's probably lost and can't find his way back. That'd be unfamiliar territory for him."

"What are we waiting for, then?" demanded McTaggart.

"This," I said, taking out the sheets wrapped around the carbon paper. "I want each of you to sit down and make a

copy of this, then keep it on you. It might be that that way we'll have a re-entry into this world if we can't find the usual exit. Okay? "

They nodded, and found pens and pencils and began to copy the weird symbols mathematicians use. I couldn't make head or tail of it, but I wrote out my own copy along with the others. "Do you all follow it?" I asked.

Now these men had been staff officers in a pretty high-flown armoured division. They were not elementary-school rejects. After a little time of concentration, they all agreed that whilst they didn't follow the thinking behind the equations, the equation itself was perfectly understandable. I looked at the squiggly marks and the way negatives and positives switched sides, and square-root signs and other ten to the power of umpteen were scattered about, and felt a twinge of misgiving.

Then I shrugged that off. I'd read the equation and I was ready to get in after Alan. We all picked up our gear, sharing the weights and the ammunition evenly, and trooped out and went down in the lift in relays.

Trying to sort out the married men from the bachelors had been impossible—this was just a jaunt, a shikari into a new and strange world. Grab old Alan and leg it back. What a yarn! So everyone went.

Despite what they had seen and the grimness of the weapons with which they were draped, they just couldn't take it seriously. It was a stupendously wonderful continuation of the party. And in that spirit they trooped along the snow-covered pavement, laughing and singing, whooping with the sheer excitement of having something extraordinary to do after too many years of fat and slothful peacetime living.

We must have presented a strange sight. A group of men, all big and tough and self-possessed, acting like a gang of school-children out on a romp, festooned with guns and bazookas and bags of food and bottles of water, carrying wooden ammunition boxes filled with ammunition, walking along a snow-covered London street, this should be enough to make anyone turn a head.

The policeman down beyond the Underground entrance saw us and began to plod stolidly towards us. We broke into

a run, still shouting and laughing, and plunged down the stairs.

Tony Ufton and Steve Searles were leading. They vanished on the seventh step. Jock McTaggart and Taffy Llewellyn, closely followed by Punchy Draycott who carried a broom-handle with a red duster tied to it as a marker, vanished in turn. Stan Shaw went and the others and I, as it were riding herd on them, ducked down last.

They all vanished, one by one, before my eyes as I ran down the stairs. I felt that blast of oven heat and then I was on and through—and was running down the Underground stairs, my tommy-gun slung over my shoulder and my elephant gun at the ready, feeling my shoes crushing dirty snow, seeing the steel treads and the tiled walls and the strip illumination.

I was alone.

Alone, in the entrance to a London Underground station, draped in weapons and ammunition bandoliers, a carving knife at my waist, a floppy safari hat on my head, field glasses around my neck, alone and feeling very stupid and very ineffectual.

"Hullo, hullo! Now then, sir, what's all this?"

The policeman gazed down from the top of the steps. He had his truncheon half drawn and his whistle was to his lips.

He could see at a glance that I was a dangerous lunatic.

"They've gone!" I shouted. "Gone without me!"

"Well," the constable said phlegmatically. "We'll pick them up when they get off at their station. Now come along, sir. If you please."

So, as there was nothing else to do, I went.

They let me off with a caution; but they took the Tommy-gun away and they still are inclined to be obnoxious about it. Seems Punchy Draycott was not too particular where he found his merchandise.

And none of the men who went down has come back. Not one.

Are they still roaming about in that eerie jungle-world looking for Alan Watkins?

Or have they found him and are now searching desperately for the way back?

Or, perhaps, and knowing them, are they having themselves a whale of a time out there—a dinosaur of a time, perhaps I should say—going on the biggest game hunt that any men have ever known?

I can't say.

I don't like to think that their bones lie mouldering in that foetid jungle, waiting, if the miracle of fossilization occurs, to be dug up and disbelieved by modern men.

And, most bitterly of all, I curse my infantile brain that has never grasped the elusiveness of mathematics. I didn't follow that equation at all. It was quite beyond my comprehension.

Yet they all understood—they all went through.

I'm working hard to get back to G.C.E. standard. The correspondence course is very good. Sometimes my postal tutor shows his exasperation with me in red-inked little notes full of sarcasm; but I bear it all.

I have just to learn maths and get through into that other world and find my friends—or what has happened to them.

Often I stand for hours outside that Underground entrance, waiting. But there is little hope.

Gradually I am regaining contact with other old friends and comrades, building up a little battle group of people who are interested to know what has become of their old buddies. What's happened to old Alan Watkins? they'll ask. Or when was the last time you saw Steve Searles? he isn't around the Museum these days. And fancy dapper Tony Ufton disappearing from his fire chief's job.

Oh yes, they're missed.

As soon as G.C.E. is under my belt I'm going on to degree standard. Only in maths, of course.

In time with my increasing understanding, the nucleus of interested men from the old division is growing. They're all ready to help if they can.

I'm looking forward to the day when I can throw another party, fully provided with another consignment of artillery and safari stores, and show the assembled company what happens when you read a certain set of equations and then descend seven stairs.

I'll let you know the result when I get back.

—Frank Brandon

STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

Sam Moskowitz's article this month seems to point out that celebrated author Philip Wylie was one of the early science fiction fans who graduated rapidly into the ranks of the professional writers.

14. Philip Wylie

by Sam Moskowitz

In March, 1930, the Book League Monthly, a paper-bound facsimile of the Book-of-the-Month Club, offered its readership a selection filled with some of the most startling situations yet imagined: a man who could lift weights of four tons with ease, leap such distances that he almost seemed to fly, shed machine-gun bullets as a bridegroom sheds rice, rip bank vaults apart as though they were papier-mache or break a charging bull's neck with a side-handed cuff. The book was *Gladiator* by Philip Wylie. Most people probably recognize the character: Superman, of course—the original.

A few years later a struggling Cleveland cartoonist, Joe Schuster, and his fledgling author associate, Jerome Siegel, would borrow the central theme from *Gladiator*, even paraphrase some of the dialogue, to create one of the most

fabulously popular cartoon adventure strips of our time and no one would dream the idea had once formed the basis of a serious novel.

Chronologically, *Gladiator* was the third book by Philip Wylie, preceded by two novels of manners, *Heavy Laden* (1928) and *Babes and Sucklings* (1929). In point of fact, it was the first novel he wrote and when it was accepted by Alfred A. Knopf the publisher agreed to hold it back for a few years until Wylie established a reputation with more general works of fiction.

There have been many types of supermen in fiction, but if we rule out Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan on the basis that it is theoretically within the realm of possibility that a properly selected, trained and reared human being could attain comparable strength, agility and ferocity, then *Gladiator* is probably the greatest story of a *physical* superman since *Samson and Delilah*.

A veritable Casper Milque-toast of a professor, Abednego Danner, injects his domineering wife, newly pregnant, with a chemical while she is under the effects of an opiate. The effect on the embryo is to form a child with superhuman strength. The mother realizes she has a problem on her hands, when the tiny baby displays phenomenal strength, easily smashing his crib to smithereens with a careless gesture of the hand.

The neighbours are shocked by the metal cage built for the child and gossip concerning the abnormality of the youthful Hugo Danner becomes the topic of the college town.

The painstaking care with which the Danners train their child to hide his strength and the psychological impact upon Hugo of his growing awareness of "differentness" is superbly delineated by the author.

A star football player, the boy leaves home and school after accidentally killing a member of the other team. He seeks to find a place for himself and his Hurculean strength in the world, at one time or another trying prize fighting, strong-man acts, pearl fishing, soldiering, iron work, farming and banking, but each career is terminated by the inability of associates to accept his unparalleled physical power. The willing suspension of disbelief on this score is strengthened by Wylie's investing Hugo Danner with only normal intelligence.

The author's purpose is simple and brutally direct—to expose the plight of a truly superior man in a world of ordinary people. As Wylie was to say years later in his internationally famous *Generation of Vipers*: "For if ever there does appear upon this planet a tightly knit minority of really superior people, it will be the end of all the rest of mankind—and mankind knows it, not having come through a billion-odd years of evolutionary struggle for nothing."

When finally, a professor who understands and befriends Danner suggests the creation of a superhuman race in the wilderness, Hugo Danner, unable to resolve his doubts, lifts his eyes to the heavens and pleads for a sign. A bolt of lightning strikes him dead.

The major flaw in the book is its unconvincing ending, but excepting that, it is a rewarding, carefully written work that clearly heralded an extraordinary new talent on the science fiction scene.

Gladiator was brought to the attention of science fiction devotees by C. A. Brandt, one of the leading authorities of that period in a major 1,000-word review in the June, 1930, issue of *Amazing Stories*, the leading magazine in the field. "In spite of the obvious shortcomings of this book," Brandt concluded, alluding to its finale, "it is quite enjoyable and will not be forgotten as quickly as the average 'bestseller'."

The science fiction world was to see much more of Philip Gordon Wylie. Born May 12, 1902, son of a Methodist minister, Philip Wylie made a case for the transmission of literary aptitude genetically when he stated: "I am the son of a minister of considerable eloquence and of a mother who wrote novels for magazines, the brother of a novelist, teacher and essayist, and the half-brother of as vivid a writer as death ever choked into premature silence—so I have always lived in the midst of language." Philip Wylie's mother died while he was still a child and his father raised him. Fascinated by science, he practically memorized the children's *Book of Knowledge* by the age of 12. He stole books on explosives from the library of the swank New Jersey suburb of Montclair and successfully manufactured explosives and fireworks, withal managing to keep from blowing his head off.

Jules Verne and H. G. Wells raised his interest in science to a fever so that in high school he favoured mathematics and physics. Nevertheless, the discovery of James Joyce and

other literary experimentalists of the early part of the century, as well as poetic aspirations, altered his interests sufficiently so that he registered at Princeton with the idea of majoring in English. His application was made too late and, in desperation, he pleaded with the Dean to make an exception in his case.

The Dean agreed on condition that he be permitted to lay out Wylie's curriculum. The Dean was partial to science, and Wylie found himself burdened with all the higher mathematics, physics, geology, evolution and biology he could handle. He heroically completed three years, then in 1923 threw in the sponge, for reasons personal more than academic.

Out of college, young Wylie steered back in the direction of a literary career, becoming a member of the staff of *The New Yorker* in 1925. His interest in science fiction had not terminated with Verne and Wells and he read Edgar Rice Burroughs until the Mars series convinced him that he knew infinitely more science than John Carter's creator. When the world's first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, published by Hugo Gernsback, appeared in 1926, it could boast Philip Wylie as a charter reader.

The influence of *Amazing Stories* was apparent in the method used by Philip Wylie in developing his philosophical concept of the outsidership of the exceptional man in *Gladiator*. Its acceptance by Knopf in 1927 probably contributed to the shortness of his stint as advertising manager of the Cosmopolitan Book Corp. which occupied him during portions of 1927 and 1928. During this period, Cosmopolitan published S. Fowler Wright's classic bestseller, *Deluge*, a tale of planetary flood and disaster that was made into a motion picture by RKO in 1933. Elements in certain world catastrophe sequences in *Deluge* seem to echo in Wylie's later *When Worlds Collide*, particularly man's reversion to unreasoning savagery; a quick peeling away of the veneer of civilization.

One year after the publication of *Gladiator*, Farrar and Rinehart issued another science fiction novel by Philip Wylie, *The Murderer Invisible*, dealing with a man who discovers the secret of invisibility and seeks to first terrorize and then rule the world. There are dramatic scenes of destruction and chaos in Washington, D.C., and New York, but the

scientist is eventually betrayed by a girl he thought loved him.

This novel clearly reveals the patronage of H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*, through an identical method of achieving invisibility by attaining ultimate transparency of all body bone and tissue after neutralizing colour and pigment.

Universal Studios had purchased *The Invisible Man* for screening at the time *The Murderer Invisible* appeared. Wylie's more sensational development of the theme attracted their attention. They bought movie rights to Wylie's book and the picture, *The Invisible Man*, which appeared in 1933 owed as much to Wylie as to Wells in the final form.

As a novel, though fast paced and occasionally memorable, *The Murderer Invisible* was too melodramatic and derivative to make a serious impact.

Just previous to this, Philip Wylie had made his first contact with Hollywood on the recommendation of the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Paramount had purchased *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H. G. Wells and was looking for a man to adapt it to the screen. They had great misgivings as to the plausibility of the fantastic concept of surgically transforming animals into humans, but took heart when inveterate Wells fan and science fiction lover Philip Wylie assured them that the biological aspects of the story were sound. They hired him to do the script for what developed to be a screen horror masterpiece which appeared as *The Island of Lost Souls* in 1932 and was the vehicle by which George Laughton was introduced to the American audience.

Philip Wylie's adventure novel, *The Savage Gentleman*, appeared from Farrar and Rinehart in 1932 while he was employed full-time in Hollywood. It dealt with the results of a social experiment, conducted by the owner of a chain of eleven American newspapers, who takes his infant son and a few trusted aides to an uncharted island in the Pacific after an unfortunate and embittering marriage. It is his intention to raise his son away from the corrupting influence of civilization.

The island has the crumbling remains of an ancient civilization as well as types of zebu-oxen and giant lemurs that evolution forgot. After 33 years on the island, during which time the baby has become a physical giant capable of kill-

ing sharks with a hunting knife for sport and the equivalent of a Doctor of Philosophy through the training of his father, the small group is rescued from the island by a Scandinavian freighter.

His father has died of a heart attack, but the son, Henry Stone, returns to civilization to find himself heir to an estate that has grown to twenty-two newspapers and eleven banks. He rescues his newspapers from corrupt leadership, learns about women and evolves a philosophical defence against the base aspects of much of the world in an adroitly told tale whose distillation from the Edgar Rice Burroughs formula would have been obvious without the author's giving it away in the greeting of Henry Stone by the lawyer of his estate: "Stone! Good God, young man, what a surprise! And what a story!" He smiled ruefully, then. "And how we've mishandled it. We've made the young scion of our founder into a *Tarzan*, without any real information about him at all."

Much more significant are the lines in the book delivered by Henry Stone's father: "I've told him McCobb—all about women. About women as mothers. And I've recounted their sins. Their shortcomings. Their lack of imagination and their superficiality. I've tried to educate him—prejudice him, perhaps—without lying. He understands." It was only 1932, a full ten years before *Generation of Vipers* would explode "Momism" on the unsuspecting public with the intensity of a hydrogen bomb, but few would remember how long it had been in gestation. Not even Philip Wylie seemed aware of the year the concept had cropped up in his work when he attributed its inclusion in *Generation of Vipers*, during a live television interview with Mike Wallace on "Night Beat" in 1957, to a remark by Hervey Allan, novelist, concerning a division of soldiers that had spelled out "Mom" on the drill field.

And as far as women in mass were concerned, Philip Wylie has the elder Stone leave as a legacy to his son the advice: "Never, never, never believe a woman . . . Women are ruin. Love is a myth. Marry when you are over forty-five and marry someone you do not love. Love is ruin."

But *Generation of Vipers* was still a long way off and Hollywood, oblivious of "Momism" but quite aware of the popularity of *Tarzan*, chortled with glee at the thought that

they had a screenwriter who could create a counterpart of Burroughs' ape-man. Philip Wylie brought into being the lion-man as the lead character in a jungle thriller, *The King of the Jungle*, a Paramount release in 1933 that was to parade the marvellous physique of champion swimmer Buster Crabbe across the silver screen in his initial role.

The Island of Lost Souls had proved good box office, so Philip Wylie was given another try at a horror script which the public viewed as *Murders in the Zoo*, starring Lionel Atwill, also in 1933.

But Wylie had no intention of being typed. True, during this period he was fully as handsome as many of the movie stars, a superb swimmer with a fine physique (augmented by a bit of weight lifting) and with a cultivated manner contradicting the savagery of his rhetoric. Good money and good living did not diminish his interest in science. Learning the filmmakers were wracking their brains on who to get as a consultant for the little-known science of radioactivity around which a picture on the life of Mme. Curie, co-discoverer of radium was being shot, the ubiquitous Philip Wylie assured them he knew just the man. He borrowed the script and headed for the California Institute of Technology. There he talked to Robert A. Millikan, who had won the Nobel prize in 1923 for the isolation of the electron and the measurement of its charge and was at that very moment still shining up the Roosevelt Association Medal awarded him in 1932 for his research in cosmic rays.

Turning the script over to a few of his associate physicists, Millikan took Philip Wylie on a guided tour around the Norman Bridges Laboratory, where, even then, crackling cyclotrons were contributing to man's forthcoming harnessing of the atom.

Wylie was entranced and during the remainder of his period in Hollywood spent more time at the Norman Bridges Laboratory than on the set. His scientific background at Princeton gave him an easy grasp of the subject and the information he absorbed from the leading theoreticians and experiments at the Laboratory proved a more advanced course in physics than could have been obtained in the university classrooms.

So enthusiastic and convincing did Philip Wylie become as to the wonders of future science that the studio heads decided

to proceed on a serious film to be titled *Fifty Years From Now* and assigned Philip Wylie to tour the country with Milton Mackaye visiting top scientists and experimental laboratories, to assemble authentic information suitable for the production. A marvellous portfolio was assembled and the picture on the world of 1983 was ready to go into production when the paths of H. G. Wells and Philip Wylie crossed again. Out of England came news that Alexander Korda had purchased H. G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come* on a similar forecast of the future. This finally appeared as *Things to Come*, starring Raymond Massey and Cedric Hardwicke in 1935 and plans for *Fifty Years From Now* were permanently shelved.

Despite his rigid Hollywood schedule, Wylie, a speedy and prolific writer, never ceased his book and magazine output. He had been a contributor to *Red Book* magazine and had collaborated with its editor, Edwin Balmer, on a non-fantasy novel, *5 Fatal Words*. Donald Kennicott, editor of *Red Book's* companion magazine, *Blue Book*, characterized Balmer as "a wizard in ideas, plot and suspenseful situation, but rather left-handed in the detail of writing. As a result, a great deal of his work was done in collaboration—for a long time with his brother-in-law William MacHarg, and later with Philip Wylie and others."

Balmer, in collaboration with MacHarg, received considerable notoriety by forecasting the lie detector. In the most accurate scientific detail, they had predicted not only the method that was eventually used, but a halfdozen other approaches which might have proved equally effective, in a series of short stories published in book form in 1910 as *The Achievements of Luther Trant*, by Small Maynard in Boston. Most of the collection was reprinted by Hugo Gernsback in his science fiction magazines, *Amazing Stories* and *Scientific Detective Monthly* in the late twenties and early thirties. Edwin Balmer also had a science fiction novel, *The Flying Death*, to his credit.

A bug on astronomy, Balmer had roughed out a sequence of events for a novel where two planets enter our solar system from outer space. One will strike the earth with resultant mutual destruction. The only chance man has for survival is to build space ships and transfer a few thousand

men and women to the second invading world—which will take up an orbit around the sun—before it moves out of range. He presented this idea to Wylie and found a kindred spirit. Like a child with a new toy, Philip Wylie assembled his physicist friends at Cal Tech and mathematically mapped out the scientific elements by which this feat of special leap frog could be accomplished. The time lost in the advancement of atomics was unquestionably science fiction's gain.

The collaboration, written as *These Shall Not Die*, was retitled *When Worlds Collide* by Donald Kennicott and opened in the September, 1932, issue of *Blue Book*.

In 1932 there were not enough science fiction magazines to assuage the literary hunger of its thousands of more avid followers. Along with Munsey's *Argosy*, *Blue Book* catered heavily to this group obtaining first magazine publication of the majority of Edgar Rice Burroughs' novels. *Tarzan and the Leopard Men* ran almost concurrently with *When Worlds Collide*. This, together with a price reduction to 15 cents effective with that issue, gave Balmer and Wylie's effort exposure to a leadership swollen with recruits from the science fiction magazines.

"In this issue," Donald Kennicott told them, "appears one of the most remarkable novels any magazine has printed in years—'When Worlds Collide,' the collaboration of two of America's best writers . . . you have a real novelty awaiting you . . ."

The collaboration proved a sensation. There had been tales of cosmic disaster before and on a grand scale, but never one told with such scientific verisimilitude, literary facility and focus on the individual.

The dialogue was as slick as the best magazines, the tension mounted with every chapter, yet the author's sincerity was never in question.

When Frederick A. Stokes Co. enshrined the novel in cloth covers, reviewer C. A. Brandt, who also worked as first reader of *Amazing Stories*, gave it an entire page in the October 1933 issue of that magazine, leading off with: "*When Worlds Collide* is easily worth twenty times that amount (\$2.00) and all lovers of science fiction are urged to read it.

"If it had been my duty to read the manuscript and comment on it, I would have called it 'super-excellent,' and

I am glad to say that I seldom read anything as well done as this particular book.

"It is an astronomical fantasy of the first magnitude, exceedingly well written."

His enthusiasm was echoed by the readers. Already, the unique phenomena of fan magazines devoted to science fiction had come into being, and one of the earliest and most famous of these, *The Time Traveller*, polled its readers for the best magazine science fiction novel of 1932. The winner was overwhelmingly *When Worlds Collide* and was so announced in their Winter, 1933 issue.

Any victory is only relative to the calibre of the competition and, by the standards of the science fiction fans of 1932, it was formidable. *Argosy* had run in the past year A. Merritt's *Dwellers in the Mirage*, considered a candidate for his best novel; Edgar Rice Burroughs, who perennially outsold the Bible, had started a new interplanetary series with *Pirates of Venus*, and Austin Hall, after more than a decade of reader pressure, had finally written *The Spot of Light*, sequel to the almost legendary *Blind Spot*, which he had co-authored with Homer Eon Flint. *Weird Tales* ran *Buccaneers of Venus* by popular Burroughs imitator Otis Adelbert Kline, while renowned mathematician Eric Temple Bell, writing under the nom de plume of John Taine, offered *The Time Stream* in *Wonder Stories*.

If there is any conclusion to be drawn, it is the evident fact that all the above stories belonged to the old scientific romance school which were long on escape and adventure and short on science. Wylie displayed that good science was not incompatible with gripping writing and thrilling situations, and his use of atomic energy for motive power proved impressively prophetic.

The science fiction fans were not the only ones impressed. Paramount bought *When Worlds Collide* (keeping it on the shelf until 1951) and the novel, with the original illustrations from *Blue Book* was syndicated to the newspapers.

With such popularity, a sequel was a foregone conclusion and *After Worlds Collide* began serialization in *Blue Book* for November, 1933. The first novel had ended with the landing on the new world, the discovery that the air was breathable and that there were evidences of alien civilization.

In the sequel, the reader is led on a marvellous tour of discovery involving a chain of connected, automatically-functioning cities but with no sign of life, though paintings reveal that the original inhabitants were human-like in appearance.

Ships from several other nations have successfully escaped from Earth and their passengers have occupied another city. A grim conflict in an otherworldly setting develops between an Asiatic-held city and the Americans. Ultimately the Americans are victorious, but the prime mystery remains: What happened to the builders of the cities?

Reader reaction to *After Worlds Collide* duplicated that for the original story. When Stokes announced it for book form, a second printing was necessitated *before* publication. If this does not seem impressive, it should be remembered that the nation was in the throes of the most paralyzing depression in its history and \$2.00 books were definitely high up on the list of luxuries.

The science fiction world's leading critic, C. A. Brandt, found that he had exhausted his superlatives previously and in the July, 1934 *Amazing Stories* wrote: "As I pointed out in my review published in our October, 1933, issue, I would have labelled *When Worlds Collide* 'super-excellent' and if *After Worlds Collide* had been written as a first book and not as a sequel, I would likewise have been compelled to call it not only good, but excellent."

There seemed no question that a third book in the series, solving the riddle of the new planet's missing inhabitants was the next logical step, and indeed a plot was outlined by Balmer but vetoed by Wylie. Every word of *When Worlds Collide* had been written by Wylie and it had been published as written. Similarly, Wylie wrote all of the text of the sequel, but before press time Balmer made some alterations that affected scientific plausibility. Wylie, a purist at science fiction nurtured in the tradition of Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Hugo Gernsback, was disturbed by these changes. Balmer's plot outline of the third book would have been difficult to validate on the basis of known facts. Wylie contended that the success of the first two volumes was predicated, to a large extent, upon the high degree of respect shown for scientific accuracy. Therefore though he continued to collaborate with Balmer on adventure and detective

novels, he refused to give literary substance to the projected third in the *When Worlds Collide* series.

Up until the publication of *Generation of Vipers*, in 1942, *When Worlds Collide* was probably the best selling of all Wylie's books, going through dozens of printings, in standard editions as well as the low-priced Triangle printing, an Armed Services Edition, foreign edition and eventually pocket book printings. With *After Worlds Collide*, the two novels were collected into one volume in 1950 by Lippincott and both have never been out of print in hard covers since their first publication.

Then, very shortly after the writing of *After Worlds Collide*, a strange thing happened. Philip Wylie sat down and began to write a novel for Philip Wylie. He had once wanted to be a poet, so there was some poetry in it. He needed to get James Joyce out of his system, so sentences started without capitals, whole pages were devoted to single words and pointing fingers separated paragraphs. He was a slick-paper magazine specialist and a veteran at script dialogue and it showed. He had written other novels of manners and now he placed the emphasis on morals—lack of them. He made Philip Wylie one of the characters in the book and spelled his name right. He wrote experimentally, stream-of-consciousness, flashbacks and seasoned it with lots of sex.

Despite this melange, the clarity and honesty of style so characteristic of him made the book read easily and well. He called it *Finnley Wren* and overnight they talked about him as an important mainstream writer. There was almost everything of Wylie in the book but science fiction. He corrected that by having one of his characters sit down and read two short stories, unrelated to the novel but incorporated complete in the text. One he called *An Epistle to the Thessalonians* and the other *Epistle to the Galatians*.

The former had the distinction of being Wylie's only fictional inclusion in a science fiction magazine, running in the December, 1950, issue of *Worlds Beyond*. It is a brilliantly written satire involving a giant, a thousand miles in height, that appears from space, kicks the city of New York off the map, and departs as enigmatically as he arrived. The second *Epistle* is a brief but devastating vignette aimed at racism (which may have been the inspiration of Herbert Read's *The Green Child*, 1935), wherein a scientist

discovers a drug which is a life-long preventive for all known disease at a cost of three-tenths of a cent per person, but no one will take it because it turns the user green!

Philip Wylie returned to Hollywood for two years with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer beginning in 1937. His first novel, *Gladiator*, was released as a motion picture by Columbia in 1938. They turned it into a rather pointless comedy starring mammoth-mouthed J. E. Brown, but Brown wasn't too happy about the entire thing, since he developed a double hernia wrestling Man Mountain Dean in one of the film's sequences.

The literary world, like a fighter watching an opponent's highly-touted right, waited for a repetition of *Finnley Wren*, to suddenly find itself stunned on the canvas from a rhetorical left hook in the form of *Generation of Vipers* from Rinehart in 1942.

"For many years—indeed, for all of my adult life—I have yearned far more to contribute to thought than to mere entertainment," Wylie said in the preface to that book. "And, while I have watched a score of men whom I considered to be the veriest charlatans attain a high degree of reputation as thinkers, my own thoughts have been almost uniformly relegated to the doghouse . . . The urge in me to do that was unquenchable. No calumny, no ribald denunciation—not even, I have found, the burning of my books in my own country—can arrest my ambition to become that figure of more than well-paid authorship: a wise guy. That is *my* vanity."

With a style of writing which in beauty of phrasing, clearness of meaning and boundless inventiveness now owed more to his own talent than anyone's influence, Wylie excoriated the transgressions and lapses of his countrymen, sparing neither church, school, medicine, economics, morals, statesmen, educators, businessmen, military men or mothers. The last, codified under the now-generic term of "Momism," caused the greatest reaction since mothers had previously been sacrosanct when it came to social criticism.

Christ struck no harder psychological blows when he drove the moneylenders from the Temple than Wylie in *Generation of Vipers*. Though some of the more direct targets yowled in dismay, and though Wylie would now be permanently stigmatized as a woman hater, the readers, with more discern-

ment than they had been given credit for, saw that there was no meanness, viciousness or selfish purpose behind the author's indignation and took him to their hearts.

When *Night Unto Night* was issued in 1944, it made the best-seller list as a work of fiction. Almost in a mystical vein, touching upon life beyond our own and offering comfort and guidance to those who might have lost a loved one in the war, represented a renunciation of the concept of the death wish. It was entirely Wylie, however, with inserted essays on morals, diatribes against inanities and one complete science fiction story out of context titled *The Snibbs Phenomenon*, dealing with a group of Martians who gradually fitted themselves, undetected, into the pattern of the world's life during the war years, and an uncompleted fantasy, *The Cyfer Phenomenon*, concerning a man who awoke one morning to find that one of his legs was gone and the one in its place didn't belong to him.

Early in 1945, Philip Wylie wrote on order for the *American Magazine*, a long novelette entitled *The Paradise Crater*. The story was set in 1965, and though World War II had not yet ended, presupposed the Nazis had been defeated. A band of diehard Nazis with headquarters in Wyoming were planning to conquer the United States through the utilization of a deadly new weapon. *American Magazine* rejected the story as too fantastic, particularly the weapon—an atom bomb made from Uranium 237!

Harold Ober, Wylie's agent, sent the story to *Blue Book*. While science fiction magazines were exempt, other publications were required to censor any material they felt might involve national security. Donald Kennicott decided to play safe and send the story to Washington, D.C., for approval.

Security suggested that they would be a lot happier if *Blue Book* didn't publish the story. Unaware of the storm he had raised, Kennicott returned the manuscript to a thoroughly frightened Ober, who had already been contacted by Central Intelligence. Special agents were on their way to deal with Wylie, who had been placed under house arrest in a Westbury, Connecticut, hotel.

At the hotel Wylie was made to undergo a traumatic experience. A Major from Army Intelligence arrived with the dogmatic announcement that he was prepared to take Wylie's life if necessary to prevent a security leak. If it were any

comfort, he told a somewhat shaken Wylie, he was willing to sacrifice his own for the same cause.

Wylie, who had been doing public relations work for the government on the B-29 Bomber, urged that his dossier be checked in Washington. This was done and Wylie was cleared. In response to Wylie's offer to tear up the manuscript of *Paradise Crater*, the Major, mellowed by a few drinks, suggested that it be stored in the trunk until after the war.

Four months later, the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and *Blue Book* asked for the story back, publishing it in its October, 1945, number.

But the efforts of the military to restrict all material related to atomic research, particularly the May-Johnson Bill, imbued Wylie with a missionary's zeal. He wrote a short story, *Blunder*, telling how the world blew itself apart by an atomic accident out of ignorance of simple experimental data. This effective tale, which appeared in *Colliers* for January 12, 1946, is believed to have influenced opinion in favour of the McMahon Bill, which permitted a more liberal approach to the exchange of atomic data.

The crusading Wylie swung back to philosophy in *An Essay on Morals* published in 1947, which, in essence, asks people to renounce the religious vanity that holds that we are animals shaped in the image of God and thereby sets us in conflict with our own instincts and instead, to attempt to shape ourselves into Godlike animals by learning to understand our instincts and thereby our motives.

Opus 21 in 1949 was a more sophisticated elaboration cast in fictional form of the material in *Generation of Vipers*, and proved an exceptional, if lesser, success. Of interest was the short fantasy inserted in the volume concerning obscenities formed by clouds over some of the world's major cities and the collapse of organized government upon the failure of the best efforts to dissipate them.

Wylie's reputation as a woman hater, earned by *Generation of Vipers*, resulted in the *American Scholar* sending to him for comment three articles by women intimating that the world would be a finer place if it were run by the female of the species, or better yet, if the male could be dispensed with entirely.

In reply, and against the advice of his agent, who regarded the idea as uncommercial, Wylie wrote *The Disappearance*, a fantasy which postulated what would happen if all men were to simultaneously disappear from the Earth, and, conversely, if the same were to happen to all women. *The Disappearance* substantiated what many readers had sensed behind the vitriolic front of Philip Wylie—as in superbly resourceful prose he showed the interdependence of the sexes and asked them to exercise more understanding and love—that here was a fundamentally kindly and compassionate man who hoped for the best even as he exposed the worst. *The Disappearance* put Wylie's name back up on the best-seller list.

The same year as *The Disappearance*, *Collier's* asked Philip Wylie to contribute to its October 27 issue which was "Do Not Want" (a hypothetical nuclear struggle with Russia). In *Philadelphia Phase*, he did as slick and polished a entirely built around the subject of "Preview of the War We romance of Americans and Russians co-operating to clean up the rubble of an atom bombed city as has ever been published.

A year later, he was warning the nation that there were other means of delivering the atom bomb besides planes or missiles in *The Smuggled Atom Bomb*, included as one of three stories in *Three to Be Read*, published by Rinehart in 1951. This story dealt with foreign agents who smuggle parts of atom bombs into this country to assemble them here and blow up New York. Literally, he was unable to rescue the tale from a bit too much corn and melodrama.

Tomorrow, a novel of civil defence during an atomic war, was outdated within six months of its publication in 1954, when the development of hydrogen weapons destroyed its validity.

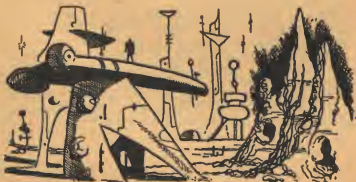
Wylie's credo for the nuclear age was best dramatized in *The Answer*, a fantasy featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* for May, 1955. Both the United States and Russia find a dead angel in their respective bomb craters after atomic tests. The angels disappear, but a golden book is left behind. Printed in a thousand diverse languages, many not of Earth, is one message: "Love one another."

Lest his admirers feel that he was going soft, Wylie had published in *True* for May, 1958, an article whose title is self-explanatory: *To Hell With Togetherness*. But at the time, the message of *The Answer* was still his primary sermon, as evidenced by *Jungle Journey*, an adventure story evidently originally intended for a better market which appeared in *Jack London's Adventure Magazine* for December, 1958. A first-rate thriller, it tells of the discovery in the jungle of a deserted spaceship, protected by a circle of flesh-eating plants capable of devouring a herd of elephants.

Upon entering the spaceship and deciphering its records, it is found that they have been left there by an alien race, thousands of years past, who check on the cultural developments of the planets and destroy races they feel are taking the wrong path: "For ours is the duty to prevent the pestilence of breeds with brains but without love from moving out into the Infinite and loving universe." They will return in one year!

More specifically, Philip Wylie addressed himself to the fraternity of science fiction writers in his essay *Science Fiction and Sanity in an Age of Crisis* appearing in *Modern Science Fiction* published by McCann in 1953. "We science fiction writers—most of us—have taught the people a little knowledge, but such a little and in such a blurred and reckless fashion that it constitutes true and factual information in the minds of very few. More than that, we have taught the people to be afraid—because most of us *are* afraid, and do not realize it. That man is a positive force, evolving and maturing, responsible for his acts and able if he will to deal with their consequences, we have not said."

—Sam Moskowitz



This month we welcome another popular American writer with a new humorous story dealing with a haunted castle. Too few modern fantasies are written in this vein—we could wish for more like it.

HEINRICH

BY WALLACE WEST

Heinrich was washing the dishes again !

I had come downstairs at Claudia's insistence and now stood holding my breath as he laboured by moonlight in the big beamed kitchen. The plates were giving him trouble as usual. Momentarily I expected another Spode to land on the floor. But our ghost did better than usual. The last plate almost slipped but he juggled it safely on to the drainboard.

"You don't have to do menial things like this, Professor Wolff," I said softly.

He spun around and saw he had been fairly caught.

"It's my anniversary, sir," he explained in a thread of voice that had a slight German accent. "I reached my majority today and wanted to find out if it really made a difference."

"Your majority?" I took a good look at him for the first time in our years of rather hectic acquaintance. Tall . . . Somewhat sloping shoulders . . . Eyes that had read too many books. Handsome in a Lincolnesque way. But certainly far past twenty-one. "We should have had a birthday party for you."

"I wanted to be sure first," he said with a shy smile. "A poltergeist is supposed to attain his full powers on the day when his home has been standing for two hundred years. That's why I did the dishes—to test my strength. It seems to be true. Didn't polter a bit except there at the last, did I?"

"You actually built this house—back in 1760?"

"Oh, not at all. I didn't, ah, pass on until 1939. My great great grandfather built it, but it remains in the Wolff family, so to speak."

Claudia, who had been eavesdropping, ducked under my arm, and cast a relieved glance at her Spode.

"So that's why medieval castles have mighty spooks," she hazarded.

"Exactly!" Heinrich smiled dimly down into her piquant face.

"If you've grown up now," she went on, half wistfully, half with regret, "I suppose you'll be leaving us soon."

I knew what she was thinking: of the fun we'd had recounting Heinrich's activities in the New Jersey home we had rebuilt, balanced against the dishes he had broken, the books scattered from their shelves by his weak fingers, and the exasperating practical jokes an adolescent poltergeist seems impelled to play.

"Unfortunately," he sighed, "I'm afraid I must stay, madame. There's a tension or, as I used to explain to my philosophy students at Rutgers, a trauma involved. You see, my brother . . ."

"You have a brother still living?" Claudia was intrigued.

"Again, unfortunately, no. Alive, I always could cope with Adolf. Dead, he is a . . . a thorn in the ectoplasm. You must understand that I wronged my baby brother." Heinrich gave a whoop of laughter. "Oh, definitely, I wronged the hell out of Adolf. That gave him a hold over me after his death . . . The rules are very strict . . . I can't go until he relents, but then, neither can he. And that's the least of it!"

His face turned sombre just as the moon hid itself and he winked out like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"Well!" My good wife switched on the lights, marched to the freezer, and started preparing two of her fancy parfaits. These, she insists, are unequalled for settling the nerves. As I put on the coffee pot, she continued:

"I never get a wink of sleep around this joint. When you're not banging out stories or tinkering with the hi-fi, Heinrich is

breaking my best dishes. I never could stand Germany, ever since I visited that awful grave of the Unknown Soldier in Berlin and the Brownshirt smacked you around. Nevertheless, I'm almost thankful you're being sent back there. I'll get some rest . . . Oops !"

I followed her glance toward the sink. One of my cigarettes was suspended above it, emitting puffs of smoke. Noting that the moon had come out again, I switched off the lights.

"Thanks," said Heinrich as he rematerialized. "I detest electric lights. They wash me out . . . Did I hear you say something about going to Germany?"

"You did. The boss told me today. Northern Electronics is putting up a big exhibit at the Munich Trade Fair. I'm to handle publicity and generally ride herd on it . . . Here, have some coffee."

I poured three cups and placed one on the drainboard. He lifted it with an effort and passed it back and forth under his nose.

"Coffee always smells better than it tasted," he said wryly, "but I surely wish I could taste some now . . . Munich, you say? I was born only fifteen miles from the place."

"Is Munich nice?" Claudia placed an ice cream-and-strawberry wonder before me.

"The town is grim, except during the Oktoberfest when it goes insane . . . No, thank you. No parfait for me . . . Munich boasts the finest cemeteries this side of China, for example.

"But Wolff Castle is a gem. It's on the Inns . . . Wonderful view of the Alps . . . Within sight of the Würm See . . . Fish . . . Deer . . . It's for sale cheap, I hear. Just needs modernizing. You could sell it to some rich American when you came home."

"I thought you were a friend, Heinrich," I said.

"How wonderful!" Claudia's green eyes were shining. "To fix up a real castle!" Then she came back to earth. "What's the catch?"

"The catch is Adolf." He looked at us with eyes so wide that white showed around their pupils. "He's 'in residence.' And, since the castle is more than a thousand years old, he is too strong to be lightly exorcised. Nevertheless, for friendship's sake . . . you could . . . you might . . ."

"Out with it!" Claudia commanded.

"Well, it occurs to me that ghosts really have no monopoly on haunting. If you buy the castle you might be able to turn the tables on my baby brother."

"New twist on the man-bites-dog theme," I nodded as I finished my parfait. "But why do you need us? I gather you've always been more than a match for Adolf."

"That was true before I died. But you forget that ghosts and such can't cross flowing water. I tried to get a special dispensation for a trip to Germany during which I hoped to pay my debt of ingratitude to Adolf. I argued that an ocean doesn't flow. They cited the Gulf Stream and Japan Current."

"Clever of them," said Claudia between mouthfuls. "But how do we know your brother deserves haunting?"

"Won't you take my word for it?"

"Haunting is not to be undertaken lightly, Heinrich."

"It's a long story." He emptied his cold coffee into the sink, held out his cup for a refill and sniffed the aroma as if gathering strength for an ordeal. "It started, I suppose, when Great Great Grandfather inherited the castle, leased this place for ninety-nine years and went back to Germany. Then his son . . ."

"We'll be here all night at this rate," Claudia yawned politely. "Skip a century or two."

"The best I can do is to skip eighty-five years. That brings us to 1878 when I was an eighteen-year-old student at the University of Munich. I was a socialist, of course. It was fashionable that year. The party had just won twelve seats in the Reichstag and was flexing its biceps. Oh, the Internationales we sang and the red flags we waved.

"But Bismarck was too smart for us. He stole our thunder by adopting our entire social welfare programme. Then he seized upon an attempted assassination of the Emperor to outlaw the party and slap about one thousand five hundred of its members in jail.

"Father, who thought Bismarck was God's vice regent, disinherited me when he caught me hiding in the castle dungeon. Mother's pleas finally softened him enough so he agreed to sneak me down to Hamburg on my promise to leave the country.

"The lease on this place had expired so I came here, rebuilt the house after a fashion, completed my education and became a professor of philosophy. I lived a reasonably pleasant

bachelor life until 1907, when I received a cablegram inviting me to attend Adolf's wedding."

"How romantic!" Claudia waited, spoon halfway to mouth.

"I haven't come to that part yet. There was no romance in that cable, I assure you. I can imagine the castle rocking on its foundations during the argument that preceded its sending. My mother saying: 'Nein, Vater! Ve must let pyegones pe pyegones. Pismarck's long in his grave, rest him, and ve soon shall pe. Ach! Even Heinrich's getting oldt. He's almost fifty and sure to pe settled down.' And father roaring: 'Nein! Nein! Once a verdammt socialist, always a verdammt,' and so forth, but finally succumbing to Mother's pleas and tears. *He* went to heaven when his time came, of course. The Iron Chancellor escorted him through the Pearly Gates.

"What a heaven though!" Our ghost shuddered. "The angels look like Valkyries. God is a dead ringer for Wotan. Cherubims concertize Wagner. But I'm ahead of my story. Where was I?"

"Attending your baby brother's wedding," Claudia prompted.

"You underrate me, madame." Heinrich gave her one of his best smiles. "I met Gertrude, the bride-to-be, at the castle. After that, I could do nothing but play Dr. Faustus."

"You didn't!" Claudia's eyes went wide.

"You haven't met Trudy," he answered softly. "She had a figure as svelte as a syllogism, a mind as acute as an axiom, and a spirit as merry as one of Voltaire's epigrams. She was . . . is . . . that perfect creature toward which evolution points. I had to have her. After a bit of persuasion, she had to have me. So we took us."

"Poor Adolf." Claudia switched allegiances. "We wouldn't even consider haunting him."

"Let me finish my story," Heinrich said sternly. "By eloping with Trudy I saved her from a fate worse than death . . . life with Adolf. We came back to the States, modernized this house, and lived as happily as two people could, despite the disparity in our ages, until 1937, when I made the one great mistake of my life . . ."

He sighed deeply and I thought I saw tears in those round eyes just before he and the moonlight winked out together.

"The old goat," Claudia stormed. "Robbing a cradle. He should have been . . ."

"Don't say the nine-letter word," I shushed her. "And let him finish, for heaven's sake. Meanwhile, I'll make more coffee."

"You men," she flounced. "Always sticking together. I'll make the coffee. You just sit there and grin like a silly ape!"

The moonlight was weak and uncertain when it shone again. So was our ghost. His voice reached us across a void, and in snatches.

"Adolf died in '37 while addressing a meeting of Storm Troopers," he began. ". . . fashionable that year . . . stroke. I was asked to come back and settle the estate . . . fool! Stupid old fool . . . took Trudy with me . . . vacation . . . Ha!"

"Speak louder," I shouted. "We're not reading you."

". . . had turned me in to the Gestapo," he shouted almost soundlessly. ". . . verdammte socialist . . . Hitler never forgave . . . concentration camp . . . ran for it . . . French border . . . carried Trudy through the wire . . . machine guns . . . died in my arms."

Heinrich crumpled, sobbing, against the sink.

"So Adolf holds her," he wailed as darkness fell.

"What do you think now?" I asked harshly as I switched the lights on.

"Why, just what I thought all the time." Claudia dabbed her eyes. "We're going to buy Wolff Castle and make Adolf wish he'd never been dead!"

Munich was as Heinrich had painted it: rococo palaces, opera houses and museums elbowing gloomy churches with graveyards from which fat marble angels leered . . . Brautwurst and Bier (which Claudia detests) . . . stifling featherbeds . . . a sly bustle everywhere. But the Army of Occupation still had prestige. An American was bowed to and called "Gnadiger Herr" instead of "Schweinhund."

When I had got my office running, Claudia dragged me off to the Inns for a look at Wolff Castle. As we drove south through the early Spring countryside, our MG raised the eyebrows of thick burghers headed for town. And Hitler's face, which graces the rear end of every Volkswagen, twitched a steel moustache whenever we overtook one.

"The castle had better be good," Claudia muttered after half an hour of such mechanized disdain.

We looped into the foothills while Alps began marching across the horizon. Trout streams tumbled. Newly-ploughed fields flowed like dark rivers through flowering valleys.

Finally the castle crouched above us at a narrow pass where its robber baron builder had exacted tribute from passers-by. It was smaller than I had expected but its lines were exquisitely lean and savage. Atop its snaggle-toothed keep, a tattered banner proclaimed:

ZUM VERKAUF ODER FÜR RENTE

"How romantic," Claudia crooned. "Just made for us . . . Of course," she added as we drove up to the sagging entrance across a bramble-covered yard, "we'll have to start right out by . . ."

"Hold everything," I commanded. "I'm not a rich American."

"Pooh!" She smiled sweetly. "Your credit's good."

An hour later she wasn't so sure of herself.

"This place is a tomb," she whispered as we surveyed the mildewed oak panelling and swaybacked stairs of the great hall. "We'd need air conditioning, or at least a lot of dehumidifiers, if we didn't want to catch our deaths . . . And refrigeration . . . And electric lights, of course . . ."

A hunk of plaster from the cracked ceiling came crashing down to dissolve in a cloud of dust on the slimy tiled floor.

"Adolf already?" she giggled after we were through sneezing.

"Electric lights were a pet phobia of Hein . . ."

"Shhh!" She grabbed my arm. "Don't mention that name."

Eventually the bill of sale was signed, reducing us to penury and causing the agent to bow until I thought he would split his britches.

Then came the job of hiring workmen. Most of the locals gave evasive answers or pretended not to understand my perfectly good American German. Eventually, one old carpenter grinned when, in desperation, I mentioned the name of the Wolff black sheep. He said, "Bei Gott," if Heinrich had been our friend he would be our contractor and round up a labour force.

During the next six weeks, while I fought my exhibit through the blueprint stage, Claudia commuted to and from the castle and painfully gave birth to each alteration. She developed migraine headaches, a fondness for Canadian Club and an annoying habit of kicking my shins when I disagreed with her on some insignificant point such as spending \$1,500 on a new roof.

Nevertheless, she kept the work moving smoothly . . . Oh, our electrician fell into an abandoned well and broke his leg. There were more than the usual number of banged thumbs and cracked heads. And a black dog chased Contractor Klaus up a tree minus his pants and considerable skin. But Mein Frau had taken out accident insurance so no real harm was done.

"I think," she said one night when we were having a drink at Hockmeister's allegedly American Bar and Grille, "that we should move in on Midsummer's Day."

"Mightn't that be pushing our luck too far, darling? Midsummer's Night has a bad reputation."

"Don't 'darling' me. You've been sitting in your nice cool office . . . with your feet on a desk, probably . . . while I've been toiling in the hot sun to make a haunted house a home. I want to challenge Adolf to do his worst."

"Better take out some ghost insurance, then."

"I've checked on that. There isn't such a policy any more. The Hungarians across the border were making too good a thing out of their zombies."

"Since Midsummer's Day is also John the Baptist's Day, I'll order silver platters for our heads."

"You can't scare me by getting biblical!" She held out her glass to the bartender for a refill and said tartly when I noticed that her hand was shaking: "It's just because I'm so damned tired."

Late in the afternoon of a soggy June 24 we piled our suitcases on the MG's luggage rack and headed toward probable doom. I hadn't been able to visit the castle for a month. Then it had been a shambles of scaffolding, lurking nails, and broken stone, plaster and glass. Now the lawn had been scythed and the surrounding orchards pruned. Stonework had been pointed up and new windows installed. Even the keep's crenelations had been restored.

Claudia hopped out of the car before it had fully stopped, ran to the mighty oak door with its brass knocker, and posed.

"Like?" she pleaded.

"Like !" I lifted her feet off the ground as I hugged and kissed her.

"Wait till you see the rest, though !" She grabbed my hand and danced inside.

When the tour was completed I assured her she had done her usual workwomanlike job of reconstruction. The bed and guest rooms would be pleasant and bright if the sun ever got round to shining again. The smoke-blackened kitchen had been kept just as it was, although the tiled stove now had electric burners and the pantry concealed a refrigerator-freezer. My only reservation concerned the hall. It was stately, no doubt about that, but very little light penetrated its slits of windows overlooking the rain-swept pass. Despite its new ceiling and comfortable furniture it had a funereal look.

"I'll turn on our chandelier for the very first time in your honour," Claudia reassured me. "It will make all the difference in the world. Close your eyes . . . Ready?"

A switch clicked.

"eeek !" said Claudia.

I opened my eyes and agreed !

Violet light cascaded from wrought iron ceiling fixture. In its pulsating glare the room had reassumed exactly the appearance of rot and neglect that had repelled us on our first visit. Mildew again streaked the newly-waxed panelling. Slime ran on the floor tiles. Dank wind blew through broken windows and the yellow eyes of rats watched us from corners.

What was infinitely worse : Claudia's face had a ghastly phosphorescent pallor and seemed crisscrossed by wrinkles. She was her own Grandma !

"How ? . . . What ?" she mouthed. "Oh, Wally ! You look dead !"

"Turn it off," I yelled, coming out of my paralysis. "Some fool has installed the wrong bulbs. This is Black Light . . . the kind geologists use to make minerals fluoresce. It can kill us !"

She scrabbled at the switch. As the fluorescence died, thunder rolled in the pass and rain came down in torrents.

"Well, I'll be a . . ." Claudia was boiling. "Chris must have done it . . . He's the electrician and he has never acted quite bright since he fell in the well. I'll fix *him* tomorrow . . . There are candles in the kitchen." Her heels clicked determinedly.

She returned, lighting fat tapers and sticking them on to the window sills with their own wax.

"Heil Hitler !" a brittle voice barked from the top of the stairs.

"Hitler's dead," Claudia retorted as we spun round to stare at a chunky burgher, complete with bristling crew cut, little pig eyes, uptwirled moustache and a neat pin stripe business suit. He looked solid as sausage in the dim light.

"That's what you think," he sneered. "A glance at today's headlines should tell you Der Feuhrer's in the best of health."

"Herr Adolf Wolff, I presume," I said with the barest quaver.

"You presume ! However, since you will be my uninvited guests for a short time, we should reach an understanding. My little joke " (the word came out "choke ") "with the lights was to convince you that my powers are not confined to chain clankings and the dropping of disobedient electricians down wells."

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"I can fix the lights," I said.

"Really?" He was the soul of arrogance.

"I once wrote a book on electronics," I said defensively.

"Ach, so!" His manner softened a trifle. "I do appreciate your repairs to my castle," he went on imperturbably.

"Your castle!" Claudia's cold hand sought mine. "We bought . . ."

"Demonic possession is ten points of the law in Bavaria. However, so long as you cause me no inconvenience you may remain. Of course I will move my family into the guest rooms."

"Must we put up with the whole Wolff clan back to Julius Caesar's time?" Claudia wailed.

"There are only three of us in residence," Adolf laughed with little inward jerks of his breath. "I'll bring the others."

"He doesn't seem too awful . . . as ghosts go," I said when we were alone. "Maybe we can . . ."

"And maybe we can't," Claudia said grimly.

Adolf returned, herding two women.

"My dear mother," he said, patting Frau Wolff's bent back. "She shrieks of nights when the moon is full in mourning for her eldest son. I keep telling her he is a lost soul as well as a socialist schwein but . . ."

"Nein, nein. Heinrich was a goot poy," murmured the old lady, seating herself in a corner of the huge fireplace and dabbing at rheumy eyes with a kitchen apron.

"And this is Gertrude, my fiancée."

Adolf bowed from the waist to the wreck of one of Germany's loveliest ladies. She was divinely fair and carried herself like a queen. But her hair was plastered with mud, her thin face was a mass of bruises, her blouse was ripped to the waist. Blood welled from two holes above her exquisite left breast and there was madness in her eyes.

"Gertrude has had an accident," Adolf explained. "But she soon will be her old sweet self again. Won't you, my love?" He caressed the girl's sunken cheek.

Her teeth closed on those sensuously wriggling fingers and we heard the crunch of bone between them.

"I apologize for my Gertrude's behaviour," Adolf said as he slapped himself free. "Now we bid you goodnight and pleasant dreams."

He presented one arm to his mother and another to the girl. They paced across the hall and up the stairs. Only Trudy looked back before she disappeared, dripping gore.

"I hope you didn't forget to bring the liquor," Claudia whispered.

It was war, of course, after that scene.

We found haunting a full-time job and Adolf no mean antagonist. At the end of three weeks of unadulterated hell for both sides, the score stood as follows :

Round One : I soldered 1,000-watt bulbs into every light fixture, from attic to dungeon. Adolf appeared as usual, not quite so sausagey as before, but apparently comfortable in a pair of dark glasses. Adolf's round !

Round Two : I installed a powerful hi-fi set (Telefunken) and played Negro jazz, *loud*. Aryan Adolf shunned us until he thought of stuffing his ears with our floor wax. Adolf's round.

Round Three : He paraded Trudy to scare the living daylight out of prospective servants. Poor Claudia was left alone to spend half her waking hours—she had few others—mopping blood. Adolf's round.

Round Four : During a day and night that I just had to spend in Munich the kitchen freezer broke down. Claudia called Chris, since no other electrician would come near us. He re-jiggered the circuits so that we were presented with boiling goulash when we opened the lid. Adolf's round.

Round Five : I installed dehumidifiers in every room, set their dials for "Bone Dry" and watched Adolf squirm and shrivel. Our round.

Round Six : Perhaps because of the air's unnatural dryness, the wallpaper—six layers of it, new and old—peeled off our bedroom walls and ceiling in one piece in the middle of the night. We promptly learned what "fighting your way out of a paper bag" means. Devilishly hard to do with fingernails. Adolf's round.

Round Seven : But why go on ? We hadn't been evicted, despite Adolf's best efforts, but my exhibit was a mess and Claudia had begun to look like a ghost herself.

One hot night late in August we tried to snatch a few hours' sleep in the orchard, but were frustrated by Black Dog and a pack of howlers it rallied.

"This can't go on," Claudia wailed as we picked up our blankets and trudged toward the castle. "If we didn't have every cent we own tied up in this thing, I'd call it quits."

"We could sell out, maybe."

"What sucker would buy? The news is all over Bavaria now. Even the Munich gossip columnists are poking fun at us."

"We could burn the place and collect the insurance?"

"You couldn't set fire to that pile of rock with a thermite bomb. No, either we crack up or we get help."

"What about an exorcist, honey? There still must be some in this hag-ridden neck of the woods."

"I talked to a priest about that. Trouble is that exorcism, if it worked—and I suspect Adolf might be as hard to get rid of as a locomotive—would rub out the entire Wolff clan."

"I've become rather fond of Trudy," I said.

"So have I. Poor girl, she's grown so thin, with all this racketing around, that you can see right through her and she hasn't dripped a pint of blood in a week. I like Mama Wolff too. (She has promised not to shriek this month, by the way, because I let her mess around in the kitchen). But I'm thinking more of Heinrich. I do wish we could bring him here for one last crack at his baby brother."

"Heinrich can't cross running water," I pointed out as I reached for the handle of the castle door. "We could wait for him till hell freezes over."

"Not until hell freezes over!" She grabbed my arm. "The Arctic Ocean is frozen over now!"

"Good Lord!" I gawped at her slim shadow. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because I did, stupid."

"How can we get a message to him?"

"Send him a cable, of course."

"Western Union would never deliver a wire to a boarded-up house."

"You could fly home."

"Nuh uh! If I desert the office for another day I might as well go home for good."

"I could go."

"Not on your life. I need moral support."

"I know!" She slapped her hands with something of her old verve. "Everybody in Mendham has heard of Heinrich. I'll write a letter to our mailman . . . ask him to slip an

enclosure addressed to Heinrich under our front door. Let's see. What shall I say? 'Dear Heinrich. Need help desperately. Stow away on plane flying Polar route. For Trudy's sake, hurry.' That should bring him!"

Adolf realized that something was up. During the next few weeks he used every trick in his ghostly book.

He filled the castle with vile odours . . . stinks of rotting corpses and Los Angeles smog.

I brought gas masks out from town.

He staged re-enactments, with sound effects, of murders done in the place over the course of its history. Home, or even the Castle of Otranto, was never like this.

I wangled some film showing Hitler's last hours in Berlin and ran it in the hall. *That* stopped him.

Wolves howled outside our windows. Rats invaded the pantry. Ants crawled in the aspic. Tarantulas nested in our shoes. Unmentionable things dropped from ceilings.

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I tried to laugh such things off until Claudia remarked that "the Headless Horseman was screamingly funny, too, to everyone except Ichabod Crane."

On September 19, the day before the Oktoberfest and my neglected exhibit were scheduled to open, I came home late to find Claudia in hysterics while Adolf smirked from his favourite chimney corner.

"Oh, Wally," she sobbed, flinging herself into my arms. "He's been making passes at me all day . . . pawing me with those icky fingers. When he cornered me in the pantry I tried to stab him with a kitchen knife. He didn't have the decency to bleed!"

"There. There," I soothed. "No real harm's been done."

"Technically, I've been raped." She jerked away in a fury.

"Don't just stand there. *Do something!*"

What could I do but stand there? I had tried to throttle Adolf often enough. Always his froglike throat slipped through my fingers like rancid butter. A ghost is a ghost is a ghost.

Behind me the door blew open, letting a flood of moonlight in.

"Is Adolfchen annoying you?" a cultured voice inquired.

"Heinrich! You made it!" Claudia tried to throw herself into his arms . . . and skinned her nose on the door frame.

"Please, please make him go away."

"Raus, bruderchen," Heinrich said firmly. "Time to go to bed."

Eyes goggling, Adolf jumped to his feet at that boyhood command. He almost obeyed out of habit. Then he pulled himself together.

"Raus deinselbst. Heil Hitler," he snarled, and charged like a bear at a greyhound.

Our ghost sidestepped and dealt his brother a solid blow behind the ear. Adolf staggered, recovered, whirled, tried to get those brawny arms around his enemy.

Again Heinrich danced away.

Then, while we yelled encouragement to our champion, they fought back and forth across the hall, wading through new furniture as though it didn't exist but carooming sickeningly off the walls and the few ancestral pieces we had kept.

Blows crunched. Blood flew. To each other they were too, too solid flesh.

Despite our encouragement, it became evident that Heinrich, at least fifty astral pounds lighter than his opponent, was getting the worst of it. One eye was closed now. His breath came in gasps. Frankly, he was having the hell beaten out of him but so far . . . he had been able to . . . keep out of reach of those . . .

"Watch it, Heinrich ! Watch it !" I yelled.

He went down, with Adolf spreadeagled on top.

"I can't kill you," the Nazi snarled like a dog. "But I damned well can dismember you !" He gripped an arm and started twisting. Heinrich moaned in agony.

"Mrs. Wolff ! Trudy !" Claudia screamed as we tried vainly to stop the torture. "Help ! Heinrich's home. Hurry ! Hurry !"

Mrs. Wolff came flying out of the kitchen, swinging a rolling pin in both hands.

A Trudy I hardly recognized swept down the stairs. Her lovely eyes bright with returning intelligence, she snatched a pair of tongs from the fireplace.

"Adolf ! Adolf !" screamed Mrs. Wolff as she belaboured her "baby." "Stop that, you naughty poy. Leave Heinrich alone. Get up this minute."

Trying to protect his bruised head, Adolf staggered to his feet and spat a tooth at his brother.

"Mama's darling ! he jeered weakly. "Just you wait !"

"Get out !" The older man moved toward him, solidly flanked by his womenfolk.

"I won't. You can't make me !" Reverting to a childhood he really had never outgrown, Adolfchen began blubbling.

"Raus !"

"I've got friends. I've got powers."

"Out !" Heinrich snatched the tongs from Trudy's fingers.

Adolf retreated through the open door. There, with the night and the warlock-haunted pass at his back, he regained courage.

"You're still earthbound, Heinrich," he taunted. "You'll always be earthbound with me—and with your gory hag !" He leaped backward just in time to avoid the tongs.

Heinrich turned and held out his arms to his love. Her bruised face transfigured, Trudy fled into that sanctuary. They clung together for an eternity while her blood dripped, unnoticed, to the tiles.

"Is it true? What Adolf said about you all being earth-bound?" Claudia asked later when the five of us sat round a roaring fire and drank—or sniffed—coffee strongly laced with Canadian Club.

"Yes, he has us hooked, as you Americans put it," Heinrich was holding a cold compress to his eye. "Of course Trudy will get well, now that I'm here to love her, but I'm afraid you will have to put up with us indefinitely."

"We're delighted to have you," I said, "but it's not fair that you shouldn't be free to go to—wherever ghosts go—after all you've suffered. Isn't there some way we can help?"

"There is a way," Heinrich answered after deep thought. "It will take some doing. And if anything goes wrong you'll be extremely lucky if you're merely asked to leave Germany in a hurry."

"Tell on."

"There's only one sure way to lay a ghost," said Heinrich with a grimace. "Drive a stake through the heart of its corpse and bury said corpse at a crossroads at midnight."

"How jolly!" Claudia turned green. "A bit primitive, isn't it?"

"A hangover from the Middle Ages," he agreed. "That's why it works. It has the weight of superstition behind it."

"Where is Adolf's body?" I asked, sensing more trouble.

"He was buried, with highest military honours, in the Frauenkirche Cemetery on the Frauenplatz, right in the heart of old Munich. In a huge mausoleum with a swastika over the entrance."

"In the oldt days a guard of honour stood outside," Mrs. Wolff spoke up proudly. "My Adolfchen was a pig man."

"He still is," Heinrich said. "The guard has been withdrawn, of course, but the cemetery gate and the mausoleum will both be locked. Also, there'll be heavy traffic on the platz and the police will ask questions."

"But the Oktoberfest starts tomorrow!" Claudia jumped to her feet. "Munich will be a madhouse. You just let my Wally handle things. It will be easy as . . . as falling off a gravestone."

"I'm a public relations man, not a graverobber," I exploded.

"What's the difference?" She kissed the top of my head. "Now come to bed and get some sleep for a change. You're going to need it."

My advice to anyone who has never attended the Oktoberfest is: Go at your peril! It is a Germanic combination of Carnival in Flanders, Mardi Gras in both New Orleans and Rio, and a prison riot.

When it coincides with the Trade Fair, which brings thousands of hard-drinking, expense-accounted commercial travellers from all parts of the world, the result is indescribable. Untold barrels of bier (alcoholic content 13 per cent) are consumed in huge tents set up by Munich's brewers. Mummers parade. Papier mache monsters prowl. Fights start in the rathskellers and boil into the streets. I was not anticipating the experience as I squeezed into the car the next morning.

"Now remember," Claudia said briskly as she kissed me. "Before you go to the exhibition, rent a station wagon and buy a stake, a hammer and our costumes. Then just relax. I'll meet you at Hockmeister's around nine tonight and we'll have dinner . . ."

"Dinner!"

"Of course. We have a hard night's work ahead. We'll need something in our stomachs."

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"Very well, Mrs. Dracula. I'll order up a ragout of
'Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog.'"

"I'll settle for brautwurst again." She patted my hand.
"Now run along. Heinrich has promised to swipe keys to the cemetery and the mausoleum. Don't worry."

I planned to worry plenty, but a thousand last-minute Trade Fair details made that impossible. Somehow, I badgered my staff into opening our exhibit on time. Then, as visitors poured in, I was kept hopping, answering questions, introducing the newly-arrived Brass to prospective customers, and suchlike glorified office boy work.

When I finally got away it was long after dark and the Oktoberfest was in full swing. I was hit in the face by a blare of brass bands and other discords having to do with determined merry-making. I fought the crowds and arrived, more dead than alive, at the restaurant.

"My, you look a fright," said Claudia, who had somehow managed to get there fresh as a daisy. "Let me fix your tie . . . and comb your hair." She dipped a napkin in her glass and used it to wipe the smudges off my face. "There!" She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I have the keys. Is everything else arranged?"

"Everything. But I had to park the station wagon half a mile from the cemetery on account of the crowds."

"Oh, dear! Well, eat your dinner. Heinrich found me a perfectly lovely crossroads and I left two spades there. We'll manage."

Shortly after eleven, we stood in Adolf's mausoleum, studying his marble crypt with a flashlight and wondering how to pry off the heavy lid.

We accomplished that, too, with the sharp end of the stake . . . and staggered back as Adolf's sunken face peered up at us. He seemed about ready to climb out.

"He . . . he is dead, isn't he?" Claudia quavered.

"Oh, definitely," I answered, holding my nose. "But remarkably well preserved for his age. Adolf's a tough customer."

"W-what do we do now?"

"Get your costume on. I'll make with the stake."

I finished that grisly task, straightened up gasping . . . and yelled. A creature out of nightmare was leering over the edge of the crypt.

"It's only me, silly," Claudia laughed shakily.

"Brrr !" I managed to keep my dinner in place as I admired her death's head mask and malodorous winding sheet. "What a beauty I married ! That get up should assure us a wide berth."

After I donned my costume we got Adolf on to the stretcher and covered him with a sheet. Then we started a death march toward the cemetery gate.

"Where are Adolf's friends and powers ?" Claudia panted as we stopped for reconnaissance. "Dead Stormtroopers should be converging on us to the strains of the Horst Wessel Song."

"Adolf can do better than that," I said. "Let's get out of here before an angel swats us. The street seems to be clear of cops."

We paraded into the mob of Fraunplatz roisterers. Revellers in all stages of drunkenness and undress crowded about us at first. They backed away when Claudia began keening an Irish dirge.

We proceeded around one side of the square at a snail's pace. Then a siren screamed.

"Adolf and Munich's TV traffic control system are on the job," I groaned. "They've found the crypt. Run for it."

"How can I run in this winding sheet ? Keep going."

"Let's take cover, at least, till the chase goes by."

As other sirens began hooting, we forced our way into the shadows of a building entrance through the milling, frightened mob. (Memories of Hitler's old dragnets were stirring).

We hid for half an hour while squad cars snooped like bloodhounds.

"We've got to get to the crossroads," Claudia whispered when the turmoil had moved off down the street. "It's getting late."

"Cut across the square, then. Car's on the other side."

The centre of the Frauenplatz was torn up—as usual. (Street repairs seems to be a Munich requirement whenever a parade or festival is scheduled).

Claudia stumbled into a trench and went to her knees.

Our corpse tumbled out of the stretcher.

Someone screamed.

A police whistle shrilled.

"This is it," I yelled. "Scram !"

"No!" Claudia hung on to a wooden horse that blocked a deep hole in the pavement. "Listen!"

The Frauenkircke clock had begun to toll midnight.

"How long does he have to *stay* buried?" she demanded.

"What?"

"I said: 'How long does Adolf have to stay buried before his ghost is laid?'"

"Have you gone out of your mind?"

"In with him!" She grabbed Adolf's shoulders. "Frauenplatz is one of the world's cross roads!"

I helped her push our mummy over the edge of the hole. It flopped into a mess of sewer pipes like a bundle of dry sticks.

"Just the place for dear Adolf," she panted. "Now that dump cart . . . Help me tilt it."

"Perfect!" She dusted her hands as debris rumbled down to fill the hole.

Wolff Castle's lights blazed as usual when we dragged ourselves through its door just before dawn.

We shouted . . . No answer. We searched . . . In vain.

Limping back to the hall, as the first rays of sunshine poured through its narrow windows, we found a message traced on one pane with Trudy's blood.

"Perfectly pragmatic!" it read. "Goodbye. And bless you."

"Damn!" Claudia whimpered as she crept into my arms.

"It's going to be lonesome around here now."

—Wallace West



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